Dread and Hunger

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/10381656.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom & Margot Verger
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom, Beverly Katz, Dr. Frederick Chilton, Jack Crawford, Abigail Hobbs, Margot Verger, Brian Zeller
Additional Tags:	Possessive Hannibal, Hannibal is a Cannibal, Someone Help Will Graham, Stalking, Obsession, Psychologists & Psychiatrists, Romance, Slow Burn, I mean only a little slow burn not too bad, Bartender Will, Age Difference, Manipulative Hannibal, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Will trying to figure out how to be Will, sexual assault warning, Just for one chapter but still be prepared it's a wee bit dark of a tale yall, Hannigram - Freeform, Questionable Consent, Dubious Consent
Language:	English
Collections:	Read Again They Were Good (clayrin), Coup de coeur mais vraiment, A Cannibals Feast, THE 🎵 UBIQ 🦋 ☠ THE 🎭 UNIQUE 🌹, hann1bal_f1cs, i'll love the littler things, Cannibals In Love, Fine Fics for the Gentry, Hannibal
Stats:	Published: 2017-03-20 Completed: 2017-07-11 Words: 71,786 Chapters: 21/21

Dread and Hunger

by LiaS0

Summary

AU in which Will receives a secret admirer with a penchant for writing him poetry and slaughtering the innocent in artistic fashions. No one ever told him that courtship was so bloody or appealing -rather, so bloody appealing? He's a part-time bartender that can't catch a break, but at least he has one loyal customer who doesn't seem to mind bouncing from restaurant to bar to restaurant in order to have his favorite drink made by his favorite person.

There couldn't be a correlation though; Dr. Lecter is an upstanding psychiatrist that just likes his drinks served a certain way, and the Chesapeake Ripper keeps sending love letters in the hopes of one day eating him. One is, quite frankly, flattering, the other...

Will isn't stupid enough to tell anyone that it's also equally flattering, albeit horrifying at the same time. It's up for interpretation.

Right?

Slow(ish) burn, romance, obsession, gaslighting, old(er) Hannibal (10 year difference), university-aged Will

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Malbec

Chapter 1: Malbec

"So you're firing me?"

"I really wish I didn't have to do this, Will, but we promote a fun, friendly atmosphere, and even after our conversation last month I haven't seen any improvement."

"I've become far more sociable with the customers," Will protested.

"You're using full sentences, but I don't see much of a smile at all when you're taking orders, I don't hear people walk out of here feeling like you really made an impression, and when I have you at the bar you don't make any sort of small talk –as I said before, that's crucial. You still can't make eye contact with any of them, and you haven't looked me in the eye once since walking in my office."

Will glanced up to his boss's face, but when their eyes met he found himself decidedly looking over his shoulder.

"Yeah, see? We just…we can't have that, here. You're a nice kid, but I think you're better suited for a job that puts you out of a public, stressful environment." His boss leaned back in his chair, the squeak of it cutting through the tension. Will glanced to the armrests of the chair, and he nodded, fingers drumming on his pant legs.

"I'm sorry," he said, like that somehow helped at all.

"Put me down as a reference, and I'll make sure you can get a job somewhere else. Unfortunately, you're just not what we're looking for here." Will was presented with a paper to sign as a notice of his termination, as well as an envelope housing his final check. His motions were dull, robotic as he signed and accepted the last of his pay, and he saw himself to the door, head ducked morosely.

"And Will?" his boss called out to him. Will turned expectantly, glancing to his neck. "Just…take care of yourself, alright?"

"Right," he agreed, and he walked out of the office and down the hall where his locker was, quickly changing from the starched white shirt and tie to his normal clothes. He left them in the locker, although he kept the pants since he'd had to pay for those, and he headed towards the bar to grab his cell phone that'd been charging underneath until his boss had pulled him into the office to, in the nicest way possible, fire him.

"You out of here?" Bryan asked. Will glanced at him and nodded, unplugging the phone and tucking it into his jacket pocket.

"Yeah."

“Was he an ass about it, or did he tell you why?” Bryan, the dad of the staff, had a tinge of defensiveness to his voice at the potential embarrassment of Will’s termination.

“It was pretty professional,” Will said, shrugging. He grabbed a cherry from the small bowl of them and rolled it around in his hand before popping it into his mouth. It’s not like they’d fire him over it.

“That’s super shitty, man. Teresa over there hasn’t checked up on her people in over twenty minutes, but she’s been getting the best tables for over two weeks,” Bryan groused, and Will laughed a little.

“She can have them…I’ll find a new job.”

“Did you hear the cooks talking? They all knew about it before you even got here.”

“It’s fine, I’m just…” Will gestured towards the phone, then glanced around. While the bar of the restaurant Belle Bleu wasn’t overcrowded, there were regular patrons that sat there after a long day of work. He nodded to one such regular, then grabbed the charger from the outlet.

“Do you have an idea of a new job?”

“I’ll figure it out,” Will assured him, and he headed out from around the bar, patting his pocket to make sure he had his wallet.

“Were you let go, Will?” Will glanced to one of the patrons that sat at a small, two-person table in the bar, and he nodded politely, glancing to the knee of the man’s impressively loud plaid trousers.

“Sorry that you had to hear that,” he said awkwardly. Belle Bleu’s reputation was such that no matter the hassle and stress of working as the wait-staff, the customers were to never know. He looked to the man’s face and recognized him as one that visited every evening from Monday through Friday.

“On the contrary, I’m sad to see you go,” he said, and he lifted his glass of wine, taking a small sip of it. “Who will recommend such fine wines or inform me when something new has arrived?”

“Bryan trained me, so he’ll know just as much as I do, if not more, Dr. Lecter,” Will promised. Dr. Lecter had been going to the restaurant for as long as he could remember, always a polite and well-mannered man that it’d become somewhat of a relief when he was the only one in the bar. He didn’t press overmuch for conversation, but when the bar was empty he asked Will often about his studies, his schooling, and his work. He was an odd, reclusive man, always choosing one of the upholstered, velvet seats to take his drink, and he never ordered food with his wine. Dr. Lecter slid his fingers along the delicate stem of the wine glass, and he nodded.

“I will have to rely upon your word of his expertise, then,” he said, and his gaze flickered from toe to head, eyes settling on his face. Will intently studied his careful grip on

the glass. “Will you be looking for another job, then? One without the strains of…social obligations?”

“That’s what was recommended,” Will said wryly, and Dr. Lecter laughed.

“I’d imagine it’s difficult for someone going to school to find such a job. The foundation of the customer service industry was forged by students such as yourself, as they’re the only ones to tolerate the sometimes taxing needs of the general population.” Will didn’t find it fitting to tell the doctor that it was because college students were poor and desperate, although he laughed a little and scuffed his shoe.

“We do our best,” he said –a much better reply. If his ex-boss had witnessed it, maybe he’d have given him his job back. Probably not.

“Will you be able to find one soon? You’d mentioned paying for classes out of pocket.” How had he remembered? Will nodded, fingers tapping lazily on the leg of his trousers.

“I’ll be able to manage, Dr. Lecter, don’t you worry about me.”

“Perhaps it is the occupation, but it is in my job description to worry,” Dr. Lecter replied, smiling. It was an odd smile, but it somehow suited him. On another person, it’d seem more like the faintest of twitches of his lip, but Will had served him enough to recognize the expression.

“Well I’m not your patient,” Will replied.

“That’s true,” he agreed, and his smile grew somewhat. “Well, if you attain such a job where you work in a place much like this, do let me know. I am particular about just who pours my drink, and you’ve never disappointed.” It was an innocent enough statement. Will knew diners that only ate what one specific cook made, or drank from one specific place at the bar. When people frequented the many places of fine dining, one saw all types –the heavy tippers, the runners, the drunks and the habitual. When Dr. Lecter said it, though, there was something in the suggestive manner of his tone that made Will look up from the edge of the tablecloth to stare at him. Dr. Lecter had always been a refined man, from his three-piece suit to his wing-tip oxfords, but at the edges of his lips there was a mild twist, something mischievous and not at all innocent.

“Thank you, Dr. Lecter,” he said, his mouth suddenly dry.

“I’m sure if you inform your acquaintance, Bryan, he’ll pass along the message,” Dr. Lecter added. Will didn’t dare ask how it was the doctor knew he only saw Bryan as just that –an acquaintance.

“I’ll…be sure to do that,” he said slowly, and Dr. Lecter nodded.

“Please do.” He turned to his wine and swirled it gently, and Will excused himself, nodding to a few more of his co-workers before he went out the side door into the ally, an odd sensation in his chest. While Dr. Lecter had never outwardly shown that much

consideration or interest in him before, he'd always been known to watch people with an intense expression, like he could peel back the layers of their skin and see them. It made sense, since he was a psychiatrist. Will grabbed his bike and undid the chain, sliding it over his shoulder and pedaling towards the road, confused. Maybe he saw the aspects of Will Graham that Will Graham didn't want to be seen, and he was finally saying something about it because of professional curiosity.

It wasn't like it mattered, though. He'd just lost his job, and he'd probably never see the good doctor again.

Despite getting fired, his old boss was good to his word. Amidst term papers, homework, lab studies, and class, he managed to find another job as a bartender in an arguably better place, Sangre. Although his Spanish speaking skills were mediocre at best, he was well enough aware that the macabre name for the place was a play on the drinks they offered. The standard uniform was black, white, and a blood red vest and bowtie. The training was simple: serve drinks, appear as dour or aloof as possible while doing it.

Thankfully for Will, it was a pretty easy task to accomplish.

"So does this mean you're going to start wearing fake fangs to work now?" Beverly asked as they walked along campus. George Washington boasted a gorgeous, sprawling campus, but it did mean you had to walk for a bit in order to get to anywhere.

"It's not Hot Topic."

"Or will they make you wear a cloak on Halloween?"

"I hope not," Will replied. "It just seemed like a lot of businessmen and some new age kids that have an affinity for chamber music."

"And they're not going to ask you for the specials on Pipin' Hot Wings n' Things?"

"At most, they'll serve a couple of appetizers like 'lady fingers', or cheese and crackers."

"Lady fingers? What are they, 1800's England?" Beverly laughed.

"I think they called it 'steampunk'," Will said thoughtfully. "It's not the worst job either one of us has had."

"Yeah, I don't think I'll ever be able to go back to Chikn'Biscuit with my head held high," Beverly agreed. They rounded a corner, the quad stretched ahead of them. Normally, it was a bustling, busy area on a Thursday, but surprisingly the main area was roped off, police officers milling about as they held back curious, eager onlookers.

"Campus prank?" Beverly asked.

"Campus assault, more like," Will said, pausing. The police tape roped off the statue at the center, and although it was far away, he could see that there was something strung up in front of it.

“We should get a closer look,” Beverly said, walking down the small incline.

“We shouldn’t,” Will urged, but Beverly didn’t seem to hear him or care, her pace quickening to work through the crowd. Will considered not following, but when he saw a couple of FBI agents, he also worked through the gaggle of students.

“It’s so gross.”

“Can you believe someone would do something like that?”

“I’m going to hurl,”

“If the FBI is here, do you think this has happened before?”

“Oh my god, I *knew* that lady.”

They got as close to the police tape as they could, and at the sight, Will froze. Officers and agents alike milled in front of the statue, but it wasn’t the statue that mesmerized him. A woman was strung up before the statue, hands clasped around a large, elegant bouquet of flowers. The dress was white and flowing, lace and silk that trailed to the bottom of the statue and rippled across the concrete. It would have been delicate and demure, had she not been dead.

“Oh, shit,” Beverly murmured, and Will nodded in agreement. Blood coated the entire back of the dress, dripping down to the ground with slow, deliberate drops.

“Back, come on, back, *back*,” a hassled officer groused, motioning some students back. Throughout the crowd, a few reporters lurked, trying to get closer without drawing attention to themselves.

“Is that Mrs. Marney?” someone asked.

“Right now we’re just trying to get things taken care of, and we’d appreciate it if you would give us the space and privacy to do that,” another officer snapped. “Come on, move along.”

“Man, the stuff you’d find in the fibers of that dress would be unreal,” Beverly said, nudging Will. “Wedding dresses with lace and silk tends to grab onto *everything*.”

“You should do a report on it for your forensics class,” Will suggested quietly. His eyes were glued to the face of the corpse –rather, the veil over it.

“I probably will,” Beverly said, and she tore her eyes away to look at Will. “What’s with that face? Don’t like dead bodies?”

“Normal people don’t like dead bodies,” he muttered.

“Don’t you study stuff like this? We have the same criminology class, as well as the same psychology class.”

“It’s not the body, it’s…” Will shook his head and motioned vaguely. “Those flowers are courtship flowers. Iris, roses, carnations, dianthus, freesia, amaranth, forget-me-not, and verbena.”

“You take a botany class or something?” Beverly asked. Although sarcastic, it was clear that she was impressed.

“The lady next door in middle school had a garden,” Will replied distantly. “If the police weren’t here, I’d say Professor Brown was trying to quiz us.”

“Why?”

“This is not a casual murder,” Will observed. "This was methodical."

“Come on, get to class, come on,” a cop coaxed, and he stood in front of Beverly and Will, blocking the view. “Come on, guys, it’s a crime scene.”

“Sorry,” Will mumbled, and he led Beverly slowly through the grumbling crowd to get away. Out of the folds of too many bodies, he glanced back to the woman strung up, unable to shake the feeling that behind the veil, she was staring at him.

Homework eluded him after that. Every time he opened a textbook, he saw the woman’s body, her hands clasped around a romantic declaration. With the FBI agents there, it couldn’t be a simple case. Granted, Quantico wasn’t exactly too far away, but for them to be on the scene so quickly was an indication of something, and something big. It wasn’t as though it mattered; Beverly wanted to go into the FBI, but he had his sights on something a little easier than the psychology test he’d heard terrified whispers of.

He made a simple meal and flipped through the channels on the TV, desperately seeking a distraction. Of course, at the sight of the woman’s corpse on the local news, Will found himself pausing, hovering on the channel despite his brain demanding he move on.

“Authorities are horrified to find, right on George Washington University’s campus, another body from what is suspected to be another of the Chesapeake Ripper’s victims. The woman was brutalized, and various organs were missing, removed while the woman was presumably still alive. In their normal, archaic fashion, the ripper left behind a form of symbolism, the corpse draped in a wedding dress with a bouquet. While they are leery to label things, one of the agents was willing to explain the situation we are dealing with right now.

“They inform us to stay in groups, try not to go out too late at night, and to be smart about your surroundings. If this is the Chesapeake Ripper, the best way to ensure your safety is to not engage with strangers and to remember the buddy system. They claim that we are as safe as we want to be, but is that necessarily true? I have a psychiatric specialist, Dr. Chilton here with me to weigh in.”

“To be sure, this is a message,” the doctor said, turning from the anchorwoman to the screen. Will studied his hawkish nose and opportunistic eyes, lip curling. “Having worked

with the FBI closely in the past, what we know of this particular serial killer is that he is dangerous, cultured, and far too careful to be caught easily."

"He is sending a message, then?" the anchorwoman pressed.

"Oh, yes. The wedding dress symbolizes a union and longevity, while the flowers emphasize courtship and romance. Whoever the Chesapeake Ripper is, they're certainly trying to get someone's attention."

"Could a serial killer be in love?" She laughed at the idea, and Dr. Chilton's mouth twitched.

"To be sure, it's possible. What the concern is, is that whoever they are trying to reach may or may not realize the target that they've become. No intelligent psychopath can love and love well. They lack the empathy to try."

"You see this in a lot of cult cases, don't you?"

"Certainly, and lonely hearts sending their letters to patients at institutions who feign attachment to gain leeway to the outside world. Why, just with Charles Manson…"

Will grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the freezer and sat it down, pouring himself a drink. The longer they analyzed cult cases and serial killers, the sleepier he became, until his eyes closed involuntarily and he slept, dreams of women in ripped wedding dresses smothering him with bouquets of oleander and wolfsbane.

-

He woke up for school at approximately 6:30 A.M., and like normal he left the house by 7:00. Will Graham's routine consisted of a quick shower, a quick breakfast, and a quick glance over of his scruff before he deemed himself worthy of the public. No matter how much Beverly sighed over him, he couldn't bring himself to care too much about what people saw when they looked at him.

That was probably one of the reasons he'd gotten fired, now that he thought about it.

There was one small blip in his routine, though, as he went to step out of the door. A cream colored letter rested where he normally placed his foot, and he stopped to pick it up, confused. Elegant, curled writing spelled his name out with a flourish, and he leaned his bike against the wall so that he could open it, brows furrowed.

The paper was thick, expensive with an intriguing scent of something entirely masculine and sharp. Cologne? Lotion? He unfolded the paper and automatically reached out to catch the flower petals that slid from the folding, fingers curling over the soft velvet of them instinctively. They were not the wrinkled, crunchy petals of something long dead, but the bruised petals of something recently mishandled and broken. His throat went dry as he stared at fairly familiar colors, and when he looked to the writing on the paper, he had to lean against the wall to catch himself as his knees buckled.

"To William Graham,

It is not often I make the acquaintance of one so interesting as you, but I find myself tarrying far longer in this place as a result. You may not know it, but there is something vastly appealing about a mind that can assume the realities and worlds of another so completely, and I hope to have a face-to-face discussion with you about it sometime in the near future. In the meantime, do take care of yourself. There is a killer about, or so I'm told.

I hope you like your gift,

-C.R.

Montrachet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2: Montrachet

The FBI wasn't the friendliest place to meet someone at, but when Will explained that he had physical, vital evidence in regards to the recent murder, he was admitted into the building with an escort to Agent Jack Crawford's office. The man in question was much older, gristly in appearance and expression, and he clasped his hands together on the desk, observing Will with mild suspicion. Will tried to reassure himself that the agent probably looked at most people like that. Then again, probably not. Will studiously studied the edge of the desk rather than look at him.

"What can I do for you today, Mr. Graham?" he asked. At the presentation of the letter, his brows lifted questioningly, but he made no move to touch it.

"I go to school at the location the woman was murdered yesterday, and this morning I opened my door and found this," Will explained. "I know you haven't released whether or not it's the Chesapeake Ripper, but at the initials, I went out on a limb."

At that, Jack Crawford reached forward and picked up the letter, eyes scanning the artful, elegant script before pausing at the initials, his glare deepening.

"C.R.," he murmured. "You think the Chesapeake Ripper sent you this?"

"The body was right on the quad where I'd definitely see it, and judging from the floral arrangement, it seemed to be an offer of courtship," said Will. Saying it out loud in front of an aged FBI agent wasn't as convincing as it had sounded in his head. At the stunted silence, he hurried on. "I don't really…see people, Agent Crawford. There's no reason another person would send me something like that, and the people that I do know don't have those initials."

"Are any of your friends good for a laugh?" Jack inquired.

"They have a sense of humor, but not that kind," Will replied, not bothering to reassure him that his 'friends' could be limited to less than as many fingers he had on one hand.

"So you think that the Chesapeake Ripper is interested in you because –what, realities and your assumptions of them?" Alright, it definitely sounded stupid when Agent Crawford said it. Will inhaled, counted to three, then exhaled as slowly as possible.

"I, uhm…I have an empathy disorder," he said heavily, looking down to the bottom of the desk. The words were rocks, tumbling from his mouth with little regard to what they bruised on the way out. "Whoever wrote this knows that, and seems to know it…intimately.

The only people in the world that know about that are now you, me, the therapist my father made me go to when I was twelve, and my father. None of us wrote that letter."

"That we know of," Crawford stated, and Will glanced up to his face, jaw working furiously.

"You think I wrote that and brought it here?" he asked incredulously.

"It's possible." Crawford's shoulder twitched into a shrug.

"I can take a handwriting test if you like, but I didn't write that," Will snapped, fingers tapping along the outside of his leg. "That'd be me handing myself over on a silver platter, and I'm not the sacrificial type."

"No, but the Chesapeake Ripper is the flashy sort to do something much like that," Agent Crawford mused, and he spun on his swivel chair, grabbing his phone. "Give me Price down here."

Will's fingerprints were taken, as well as a swab of his saliva. It didn't seem to matter that he'd been the one to turn the letter in, he was treated with a sort of consternation, each move he made suspect to the situation at hand. The letter was taken by a man in latex gloves, and it disappeared from view. He was shown the door by Crawford who assured him that he'd give him a call if anything 'checked out'.

Right.

He found himself at Sangre the next night, going over the drink list and shadowing a girl a few years younger than him. It was a dim, swanky bar with just the right touches to give it a feel of pomposity as well as class. The drinks were served in old fashioned glasses, and there wasn't a single chair in the place that hadn't been reupholstered after being recovered from an antique shop.

"They want to feel like they've stepped back in time, so keep it short, sweet, and articulate," she coached him, and Will nodded, studying her hands whose nails were serrated from a bad biting habit.

"I can do that."

"Good. If you want to go grab that man's order, I'll get the guys in this corner." She disappeared around a heavy partition of velvet curtains, and Will made his way to the new patron, adjusting his satin red vest. It was itchy, like it'd been passed over by too many hands, but it would have to do, much like the Belle Bleu's uniform just had to do.

"Welcome, sir, to Sangre. Is this your first time?" The harpsichord music was just soft enough that he didn't have to raise his voice, and he smoothed out his vest before looking up. When he saw the very familiar face, he balked a little under its amused stare.

"It is," Dr. Lecter said, crossing his leg at the knee. "Is this your first day out of training?"

“Dr. Lecter, I…yes.” Will nodded, glancing about the bar area before looking back to him, studying the curve of his jaw.

“When I supposed you’d find something less drawn to the public eye, I should have known this would be such a place for you. There is a distance that was held between people in the 1800’s that this pop culture genre seems to seek.” There was an ironic twist to his mouth as he looked about the brass lamps and muted light, a dismal attempt at gaslights for ambience.

“How did you know I’d be here?” he asked, and he looked to the table when the doctor’s gaze flicked back to him.

“Your acquaintance Bryan was kind enough to tell me. I suppose gossip gets about quickly within the bartending circuit.”

“I didn’t realize I was so popular,” he said dryly, and Dr. Lecter laughed appropriately.

“No one makes an old fashioned like you do.”

“Is that what you’ll be having tonight?” Will asked, grabbing his notepad to take his order.

“I’ll try it, if you recommend it. Have you sampled their selection yet, Will?” Will glanced up to his face, and he studied his eyes, hazel and gold in the lamplight. Behind him, he heard his trainer coming back from her table, and he cleared his throat, looking away.

“Not yet, but I’ll make sure to use the top shelf bottles,” he promised, and he walked back to the bar, mixing the drink.

Like all Saturdays, the place steadily filled up as the night wore on, and Will found himself trapped behind the bar making drinks rather than taking most orders. The outfits ranged from the normal, dressy attire to the costume variety that represented the bar in its entirety, and Will found that it was more often than not easier just to pinpoint people by their clothes rather than their face or name. In between rushes, he managed to make it to Dr. Lecter’s table in order to total his bill.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Lecter, here you are,” he apologized, passing over the ticket. The man laughed lightly, reaching into his wallet for cash rather than fuss with a card.

“It’s no trouble to me, but if I may, you do seem tired. You should rest after your shift.”

“I’ll try,” he promised, although not with too much sincerity. He took the cash and returned with change, but when he went to hand it back, Dr. Lecter stood and stopped his hand, fingertips delicately gliding along the back of his hand to his wrist.

“I insist you keep the change,” he said, and at a head taller Will had to look up to try and meet his gaze. “You’ve certainly earned it, with the way you’ve been running about.”

"I…thank you," he said, and he tucked it into his pocket.

"With your neuroses, I'd imagine this amount of socializing would leave you drained after each shift." Will didn't know quite what to say to that. Was he psychoanalyzing him? He stepped away in order to let out a short huff of breath, shifting from one foot to the other.

"I'm just talking at them; they only talk back for an order or two," Will reassured him, and when a small group of ladies stepped in with hoopskirts and –god forbid –parasols, he balked at the image.

"I'm sure," Dr. Lecter said, obviously not at all sure as he took in the appearance of the people before him. He seemed to think along the same lines as Will did, judging by the faint lines just around his mouth. Will glanced to his chin, then his neck, then his shoulder, unwilling to admit he'd noticed so small of a shift in expression.

"This doesn't seem to be your style, doctor. I'd hate for you to waste your time in a place like this just because of how I mix drinks."

"Rest assured, Will. It's not just because of the drinks." There was a flirtatious allure to his voice, and he was heading towards the door before Will could even think to reply, the back of his neck heating up with the reality of what was just said. He didn't have time to meditate on it, though; the girls made it to the bar, and he made his way back behind it to greet them, relieved to find that he was not the only one on the staff or in the crowd that had a penchant for avoiding eyes.

-

This time, the letter was waiting for him when he got back from a study group a few days later, resting against the bottom of his door. He considered calling Jack Crawford, but after the first abysmal meeting, he didn't want to go through *that* again. He scooped it up and wheeled the bike into his apartment, locking the door behind him.

"To Will Graham,

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its lovliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

Yours,

-C.R.

"Yours," Will muttered, setting the letter on the table. Inside, the flower petals were much aged, remnants of what he'd taken from the bouquet. If it was the Chesapeake Ripper, he was certainly in danger. Serial killers didn't just send love letters for no reason –usually, their reasons escalated until they were wearing their love's skin as a suit in some sort of sick, bizarre homage. It was possible that this was just to back him into a paranoid corner until he

had no means of escape, but why warn him? Were the other victims warned through poetry and letters scrawled stylishly on thick-woven paper?

A quick internet search informed him that no, the Chesapeake Ripper certainly didn't send the other victims letters. If he had, Freddie Lounds would have found out –resident campus reporter with a penchant for being illegally nosy –and second, the variety of victims were too diverse and sporadic. If he'd found images of all curly-haired brunettes, maybe. As it was, none of the victims looked remotely like him, and he wasn't sure if that was a comfort or a warning sign.

Will tried to entertain the thought that it was a prank, but it was an easily discarded theory. Who would bother pranking him? If it was a prank, wouldn't they have signed it fully the Chesapeake Ripper rather than leave it to hope that he leapt to that conclusion? In truth, he'd have welcomed it as a prank rather than admit to himself that he potentially had a serial killer sending him notes.

He slept, and when he dreamed, he dreamt of white oleander and monkshood petals falling from the hands of the dead.

-

"You seem troubled, Will," Dr. Lecter said, accepting his drink. It was a Montrachet from a winery Will had only heard talk of, but Sangre offered the best in all things.

"Are you charging per hour, doctor?" Will asked, the sarcasm half-hearted at best.

"Please, you may call me Hannibal. I've known you long enough that the title is unnecessary." Hannibal swirled the wine in the glass and inhaled the bouquet, eyes closing. "A good choice."

"I thought you might like it."

"And once again I am reminded why I moved my afternoon leisure time from Belle Bleu to Sangre." Will ducked his head at the compliment, turning the drink tray flat against his stomach as he took a step back. After his initial arrival, Hannibal had resumed his Monday through Friday appearance, refusing to take advantage of the lady fingers discount if you ordered drinks from 3-7 that included a shot of Bailey's.

"To my original observation, though; are you troubled?" Will looked away from him to the empty bar because apparently no one lurking about for a steampunk aesthetic seemed to come out of hiding until at least 6:30.

"Some trouble sleeping," he admitted, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Hannibal nod.

"School assignments keeping you awake in the dark hours of the night?"

"Love letters, mostly," said Will, and he froze when he realized what'd popped out of his mouth. He hadn't meant to say it, mostly due to lack of desire to share that aspect of his

business, but also because it was troubling business at best and deadly business at worst.

"Love letters," Hannibal repeated, and a smile ghosted his lips. "Are you dating someone, Will?"

"No," he hastily replied, turning back to Hannibal. "No, just…someone sending me love letters. At least, letters of admiration."

"Do you lie awake and think of them fondly, or are you losing sleep because the contents make you uncomfortable?" Dr. Lecter tilted his head, and his knowing gaze ripped right through Will to expose him.

"It's…more my worry of who it's from," he said, and he rocked back on his heels, gripping the serving tray tightly. When Hannibal motioned for him to sit, he did so, poised on the edge of the opposing chair, watching Hannibal's crafty fingers turn the wine glass about on its napkin.

"Unrequited love?" Hannibal asked lightly.

"I don't even know who it is," Will confessed, leaning in and staring at the fake kerosene lamp between them. "I have…my suspicions, but if I'm right…"

"Ah, a secret admirer. I could imagine, with your constitution, that such a thing would be invasive and horrifying to think of," Hannibal noted, a mild tone of mocking. Will gritted his teeth and refused to acknowledge it.

"I think this person may be someone that's hurting other people, and I don't know if they're hurting them for me, or if it's just…something to pass the time." He thought of the woman on the quad and closed his eyes, lashes fluttering against his skin as he exhaled shakily.

"Have you taken your concerns to the police?"

"They weren't helpful in the least," Will replied, snorting. "In fact, they took my prints and all but accused me of bringing misleading or damning information to them." He glanced to his knees, sighed, then looked out of the semi-parted curtains to watch pedestrians outside. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do, or if I should even do anything."

"What do your school studies tell you to do in a situation like this?" Will had almost forgotten that Hannibal knew what he went to school for.

"Report your concern so that it's on file, and don't try and message back."

"Have you done *both* of those things?"

"Yes." Will nodded firmly. "I keep my door locked, my windows locked, I try not to be alone-"

"Another difficult task for one such as yourself, I'd imagine," Hannibal cut in dryly. Will looked to his shoulder, frowning.

“I have friends,” he said, like that absolved him of anything.

“I’m not questioning your acquiring of friends, but I do question your ability to open up to them and build your relationships with the sharing of intimate details about your life. When this happened to you, did you go to them?” At Will’s guilty silence, he nodded knowingly. “And when it troubled you further, did you finally seek them out?” Another silence. Hannibal took a sip of his wine. “Friendships are made to be built by trust and shared experiences that bond you, but a person such as yourself struggles with that connection to people because you struggle to open up.”

“How do you know so much about me?” Will asked suspiciously, unwilling to admit his embarrassment at being read so well.

“You’ve met my eyes once since helping me today, and that is the average of each time you’ve ever served me. I believe on a good day, you will meet my gaze approximately four to five times, and on a particularly bad day, you can’t manage the trouble at all.” It echoed his old boss, and Will nodded, morose.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Do you avoid the gaze of others because you are made physically uncomfortable, or do you see the very things one would rather keep secret?”

“You really are psychoanalyzing me,” said Will, glancing up to his face. He forced himself to look at his eyes, drumming his fingers on his knee. He made it a good three seconds before looking over his shoulder instead.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?” Hannibal asked.

“A little.”

“I’d apologize, but I’m not entirely sorry,” he revealed and Will nodded in agreement.

“I had a feeling.”

“This…person you suspect as harming people while sending you love letters; do you believe it will escalate over time?”

“That’s my concern. We’ve studied obsession, stalking, and ‘offerings’, and it doesn’t end well for the target in any case except for cases where law enforcement took their claims seriously. Even then, it’s difficult to…pinpoint the person behind it. They stay low, they stick to the shadows and underbelly of society, and they use any suspicion directed towards them as a means to make the victim appear mentally unstable and inefficient as a witness to any crime.” When a customer walked in, Will stood, turning the serving tray about in his hands. Hannibal glanced to the patron, then nodded in understanding.

“Do you feel like a victim, Will?” he wondered before Will walked away.

“I feel…” His voice halted in his throat and refused to go further. When he couldn’t finish his sentence, he nodded his head to Hannibal and excused himself silently, the back of

his neck hot with embarrassment. As he took orders, he saw Hannibal relax into his chair and look out of the window with a calm, sanguine expression, as though they'd never spoken. Thankfully, the good doctor didn't press for an admission when he finalized his bill, and Will was able to get away without having to admit that he felt rather flattered that out of everyone in DC, *he* was the one the Ripper decided to notice.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the amazing feedback, guys! I'm hoping to update twice a week, but it may only be once a week depending on how this one and Magnum Opus go.

If you want to connect on Tumblr, my username is elfnerdherder :)

Sauvignon Blanc

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Sexual Assault in the chapter at about halfway through. You can honestly skip the scene and not miss out on any plot development in said scene because it is summarized/referenced in the later part of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3: Sauvignon Blanc

When another body was reported on the Tri-Delta lawn, the school had a meltdown. Classes were cancelled –much to Beverly's dismay since she was right in the midst of a fiber analysis breakthrough –and everyone hovered in groups in order to make plans for vigils and for better security. Will sat at one of the benches nearby, watching the spectacle of teachers attempting to console and wrangle in the hysteria, all the while their own sat perched just underneath their chins.

This time, he had no doubt this kill was for him.

"They said it's the Chesapeake Ripper," Alana said, arms folded across her chest. She was one of Will's few friends, in the midst of her graduate program, her backpack stuffed so full of books it was a wonder she didn't topple over.

"It is," Will said, staring at the corpse through cuts and breaks of the living bodies milling about.

"What makes you say that?"

"He's a poet –can't you tell?" Will glanced at her wryly, and she cracked a tense grin. She was no more comfortable around dead bodies than other people were. "This is Hades tricking Persephone to Hell."

"I'm familiar with the story," said Alana, and when a teacher managed to lead a group of students away, she sat down beside him. How she wore heels in the middle of campus, he didn't know, but he did commend her for it. Struggling through wet soil in that sort of shoe seemed a punishment to him, but to each their own. He studied the patent leather for a prolonged moment before looking back to the woman posed in such a grotesque fashion.

"Behind her, he planted flowers, but the gaping black maw he created between those two trees represents Hell. The branch in the shape of a hand reaching through is Hades."

"Why did he use a branch for Hades' hand rather than another human hand?" Alana wondered. Will shrugged.

“I think that’s his hand. The branch was moved and trimmed but not killed from the tree. He says he represents the life in the darkness, so I don’t think he’d want a dead hand for that. He’s leading Persephone into what, to mortals, is the worst of places to be, but we all know she ruled Hell after getting there. Hades paved the place before her to be a queen.” Will swallowed heavily, his palms clammy against his jeans. Nervously, he drummed his fingers.

“So you think that one psychiatrist was right? Dr. Chilton claims the Chesapeake Killer is in love.” Alana wrinkled her nose in disgust at the thought, and Will twitched his shoulder in a shrug. He noted the FBI agents moving about, and that was even better confirmation than his own thoughts or Dr. Chilton’s news analysis.

“He even found the right dress to put her in. The right floral crown, the whole…set-up. He’s detailed. A romantic.”

“Are you impressed at his care, or are you horrified you can see the care he put into it?” Alana asked lightly. Will tensed, looking to her knee cap, then to the ground where her foot rested. Although they’d never talked about his mind very much, out of her respect for their friendship, there was a reason Alana was the top of her class. She knew without him ever having to say a damn thing.

“Both,” he admitted, and he scratched the back of his neck.

“Seeing and understanding doesn’t make you the same,” she assured him, and she lightly patted his shoulder, squeezing it.

“I know.”

“I know you know, but as your friend I’m making sure that you know *I* know.” He laughed at that, standing up when the sight of Persephone’s curly brown mop of hair was too much for him. That was the only inaccuracy to her appearance, and it was enough for him to solidify the kernel of truth that he’d been wrestling with for a few weeks now.

The Chesapeake Ripper was interested in him, for reasons he was too terrified to know.

-

There was a letter waiting for him when he got home, and he snatched it from the floor of the apartment hall with a vengeance. He let his bike fall onto the middle of his apartment floor as he hurriedly locked his door behind him, and when he sat down at the table, he opened it with shaky hands, the heavy paper supple and smooth. Out of the envelope, seven seeds fell, and he stared at them on the cheap wooden tabletop before he unfolded the letter, swallowing convulsively.

Dear Will,

You bring the light clasped round you, and although
I knew you’d bring it, knew it as I waited,
Knew as you’d come that you’d come cloaked in light

I had forgotten what light meant, and so
This longed for moment, so anticipated,
I stand still, dazzled by my own delight.

I see you, and you see me, and we smile
And your smile says you are as pleased as me
With everything and nothing still to say
All that we've saved and thought through all this time
Boils down to affirmation now as we
Stand here enlightened in my realm of grey.

Yours,

-C.R.

He shook his head, but the words remained the same. A steady thrum of pleasure snaked down his back and, with a groan of disgust, he tossed it to the center of the table where the other poem lay. Poetry? The Chesapeake Ripper was sending him *poetry*? Two bodies could now be said to be equally his blame, since something about him had made the Ripper want to…well, rip. He dragged his fingertips over his eyelids, rubbing them until galactic spirals churned in his vision.

He couldn't stay in his house like this. Like Dr. Lecter said –friends were supposed to be your stability.

Perhaps that was what had him out at a club that was certainly not his style that Friday night, seated at the bar while Beverly, Alana, and Alana's girlfriend, Margot, danced to a syncopated and too fast beat. Beside him, Brian Zeller took a rather large gulp of his beer, spinning on the stool to watch them.

"This was a great idea," he said to Will, motioning towards Beverly. "She's pissed they won't let her finish her work, so it's going to sit there all weekend because the school insists we aren't there." Brian was a good friend of Beverly's since they were both studying forensics with sights on the FBI. While sometimes Brian found Will to be all but intolerable, Will found that his presence was certainly tolerable enough. He wasn't Beverly, but he'd do. He needed the noise, the alcohol, and the feverish high that places like this brought in order to get rid of the image of Persephone reaching for Hades' hand on the middle of the Tri-Delta lawn. He wondered if they'd dig up the flowers the Ripper had planted, or if they'd keep it as some odd memento. He wondered if they'd give him one to put into a terra cotta pot.

"I thought she could use it," he said over the beat. He sipped his whiskey, pleased that he'd caught the woman in time before she'd given him bottom shelf well water instead of something smooth. Once he'd told her he bartended, she was quick to give him middle shelf, which was all a guy could ask for.

"This isn't your scene, though, right? I mean, you're not going to go try and…" Brian laughed and motioned towards the dance floor where several men lurked, attempting to find ways to ingratiate themselves to the gyrating bodies. Will shrugged, eyes leaping to the flashing, seizure-inducing lights.

“You can, and I won’t judge,” he promised Brian, and that’s all that Zeller needed to hear. He was gone after he chugged his beer down, and he worked through the crowd in order to get to where their friends were, moving to the beat.

Time crawled, though. While they moved and shifted and bounced about to the ever changing songs and sounds, he took drink after drink until the sweaty air became too hot, the stool beneath him too unstable. Will paid his tab and stumbled from his seat, unable to find his friends but more than able to find a side door out into an alley. He gulped in the cool air, and he wiped his forehead, leaning back against the brick and closing his eyes to make the world stop spinning for just a moment.

It was at that unfortunate moment that he was grabbed, the world lurching about him wildly as he was spun and slammed against the brick wall face first, making spots of starlight explode in his eyes.

“Fuck, what are you-”

“Sh,” the person said, and Will froze as the assailant pinned him against the wall from his knees to his shoulders, their body flush against him. He thought to shout out, to resist, but against the side of his ribs he felt a thin, deadly pressure, and his drunken mind said that yes, Will, that was indeed a knife. People with knives pressed to their skin didn’t shout or resist because they weren’t stupid, and you’re drunk but certainly not stupid.

Right?

“Don’t move.” The voice was low, gravelly. Will froze against the wall, although he had it in him to nod so that the man knew he was going to comply. Was he being robbed? He didn’t have much since he deposited his tips into his account as soon as possible, but there was at least twenty bucks in his wallet.

He didn’t go for his wallet, though, pressed so close as they were. Will knew that he was burning up from the alcohol, but that paled in comparison to the heat that radiated from the man, something that scalded his skin and pierced deep. Against his back, the man’s heart beat at a steady, regular interval, and Will knew this wasn’t the first time he’d handled another person so violently.

The man's hands began to move slowly, leisurely. They trailed along the side of his thighs, his waist, his ribs. When they reached the juncture between chest and arm, they slid over his back and splayed across his shoulder blades, the small bump in the spread informing Will that he was dragging the knife along, too. He held as still as he could, breaths turning into gasps, transforming to wheezes. He was going to die. He was going to die drunk outside of a club in an alley, then what would the Chesapeake Ripper say?

The man’s hands glided over his shoulders, then jerked him from the wall enough that he could slide his hands down his chest, across his ribs. Even with the space provided, he didn’t feel like he had an out. The man’s chest was pressed flush against him, his arms an iron cage. In the darkness of the alley, he could only see shapes, distinctions of where the knife was separate from the hand, and when he paused on Will’s heartbeat it doubled in time, alerting his attacker that he was utterly, utterly terrified.

The hands continued their investigation, gliding across his stomach and abs, hesitating at the waistline, pausing just above his jeans. He gulped, and the man's hands drifted down, stopping just at the point where his hand rested right on top of Will's member.

"Please don't," he said quietly, and the man applied pressure, rubbing the area in slow, massaging circles. Will shuddered and his head fell forward so that it could press into the brick, a sharp breath hissing from his lips. The man behind him hmm'd thoughtfully, and he pressed his nose and mouth against Will's neck, inhaling deeply.

He felt when it began to become aroused, tightening the material of his jeans, and the other man felt it, too. There was a disconnect, a whisper in his mind that reminded him that physical reaction was not a true sign of arousal, that the body naturally reacted to stimulation. When the man bit down on his neck and sucked lightly, though, the thought swept away from him, disorganized and chaotic in the rush of pleasure that made his knees weak. This wasn't right; this wasn't *right*.

It felt pretty damn good, though.

His breaths became pants, his member straining against the material. The man gripped it tightly, squeezed, and he moaned, leaning back against him. The man's free hand wrapped tightly around his chest, holding him back against the erection he could feel pressed tightly to his rear.

A door slammed to the side of the club.

The man shoved him, and he fell against the brick wall, his breaths escaping in quiet, muted gulps. Footsteps rushed away from him, and when his mind made the connection to turn and look, there was no one there. He blinked, stared at the empty alleyway, and when he finally got his legs to cooperate, he found his way to a taxi and slid into it, rubbing his neck where the assailant had left their mark.

-

The next day, well after he'd dry-heaved into the toilet and scrubbed the taste of day old whiskey from his mouth, he savagely tore open the letter that waited on his doorstep, innocent and lovely with its curling script and cream paper. This time, it was gravel that fell into his palm, and he knew without having to truly *know* just who had assaulted him in the middle of an alley in DC.

Dear Will,

You really must be more careful where you go so late at night. What if I had not been the only killer in the alleyway? What would you have done, then?

Yours,

-C.R.

-

"You look far more tired than usual, Will. How was your weekend?" Hannibal saw all, it seemed. Will set his drink down, a Sauvignon Blanc, and he rubbed the lack of sleep out of his eyes.

"Pretty hellish," he admitted, then rebuked himself. That wasn't something Hannibal Lecter had to know. He was a customer, for Christ's sake.

"More letters from your admirer?" At his gesture to sit down, Will took it, glancing about to make sure no other customers were about. Sangre wasn't a popular place on a Monday at 4:00 P.M., which is probably why he was stuck with the shift. New blood got the worst shifts.

"And what I suspect is a body, but I can't confirm that," he said, and admitting it out loud was like spitting acid onto the table before them. His fingers tapped out a tuneless beat on the server tray, and he held his breath. Should he tell Hannibal that he'd been sexually assaulted? He'd considered going to the cops, but his classes and experiences told him just how futile *that* adventure would be. Women who'd been raped or assaulted faced a gauntlet of horrifying and accusatory statements, and men were faced with a blank stare of utter disbelief. Men weren't sexually assaulted. Women mostly lied about being sexually assaulted.

He'd firmly decided against filing the report.

"It is interesting that this person has chosen you," Hannibal said, tilting his head. "Why do you think that is?"

"He thinks…I can connect with people on a level beyond human interaction," Will said slowly. Don't give it away. Don't give it away. "But I'm sure that I upset him the other night, so I may not hear from him ever again."

"How did you do that?" Dr. Lecter asked, intrigued. His eyes lightened perceptively.

"Are we going to start calling these therapy sessions, Dr. Lecter?" Will replied dryly.

"These are mere conversations between acquaintances," Hannibal replied genially. He inhaled the bouquet and smiled appreciatively at Will, nodding his approval. "Some would argue this a more of a summer wine, but I enjoy the freshness of it."

"I thought something light for the day," Will said. Something light while discussing something dark.

"A lovely thought. But do go on."

"I went out with friends to a club they like, and I got a little drunk," Will revealed, rubbing the back of his neck. "He basically informed me that he didn't like that."

"Are you so sure it's a he?"

“If the murders that are correlating to the letters are him, then yes.” He thought of the muggy, cold air that’d collected in the space around them, the heat that’d burned his skin. That was no woman that’d pressed him against the wall.

“He feels entitled to where you go and what you do, then,” Hannibal observed. “Why do you think that is?”

“Obsession,” Will replied automatically.

“So you believe this person is obsessed with you?” Will shrugged, a non-committed gesture.

“He’s obsessed with some part of me that he thinks he can see, but he doesn’t really know me. He’s never spoken to me, but he’s made assumptions, and he’s obsessed with those ideas.”

“By your logic, then, if he did come to know you, would it cease to be an obsession? Would it transcend to something more?” Hannibal wondered. “You who looked at the murders that you feel are linked to this admirer, you assumed to know of them the way this admirer assumes they know you. In your own way, does that make you obsessed in some form or other?”

“I only looked to see after their deaths correlated to me, though,” Will protested.

“Then perhaps the obsession is with yourself, that you see someone kill another and suppose it has anything to do with you,” Hannibal replied with a sly smile.

“…Maybe,” Will said reluctantly.

“Are you, perhaps, upset that he didn’t ask permission before sending you such letters?” Hannibal inquired when Will didn’t add anything. “I should have asked permission as well before engaging in any sort of conversation –my mistake.”

“It’s different with you,” Will said, looking up to his face. “You aren’t running around town killing people just to get my attention.”

“Thankfully,” Hannibal replied gravely. He maintained an intense, searching stare, and the longer Will looked, the more he found his breath coming somewhat short, wanting.

Wanting what?

“And…I like our conversations,” he added a beat later. He looked out of the window where passersby hurried through whatever errand sent them scurrying so quickly. He felt Hannibal’s stare on his skin like a stain he couldn’t quite scrub off, and he wasn’t sure whether he should elaborate or slink back to the bar where he’d pretend to wipe it down for a little while. Hannibal busied himself with enjoying the wine, and that was enough compliment for him.

“I enjoy our conversations as well, Will,” Hannibal said at last. “Despite your reluctance for any interaction with others, once you put aside a refusal to be anything more

than professional, you’re quite adept at socializing with people, as adults are wont to do.”

“My refusal to be anything more than professional?” Will asked, eyes flickering to Hannibal’s lips. They twitched.

“Oh, yes. I could see the fear in your eyes, at first; God forbid we became friendly.” It took him a second to realize that Dr. Lecter was teasing him. Will smiled wryly, and he looked to the bar, giving a start when he saw his boss. He stood and held up the server tray, akin to a shield, and he nodded to Hannibal, as professional and aloof as he could make it.

Whether his boss bought it or not, that much was uncertain. Hannibal left a generous tip, and Will was left with an odd feeling that made his bones press tight against his skin.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so happy and stunned at the amount of feedback I've gotten from you guys so far, and I'm so happy you're loving this. Is it possible to freak yourself out writing a scene? Because I did, and leaving the bar last night was an awkward affair for me while we loitered in the alley waiting on the taxi. Couldn't quite explain to my friends why... ;)

Pinot Noir

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 4: Pinot Noir

Jack Crawford found him four days later while loitering outside of his apartment. In one hand he turned his car keys over and over and over, and in the other hand he grasped a familiar cream envelope. Will stopped, heart lurching at the sight. The fight or flight instinct left him, replaced with a quiet reassurance that in reality, he hadn't actually done anything wrong.

Why did he feel so guilty, then?

"Is this where he leaves them?" Crawford asked, feigning nonchalance. In truth, he wasn't very good at it. Will could smell the discontent.

"Every time," Will replied hollowly. Jack nodded and gestured towards his front door.

"May I come in?"

"Sure." Will wheeled his bike over and unlocked the door, hair rising up on end as he walked past the FBI agent and into his house, every cell inside of him screaming to run and run fast. Jack Crawford followed him into the apartment and shut it, effectively sealing off his only practical escape.

He didn't bother concealing the three letters that sat on his table, open and unassuming. The seeds still intermingled with the flower petals and gravel on the table, the envelopes in a disheveled pile. Jack looked them over, brows raised in surprise, and he passed the new one to Will once his bike was put away. Will sat down in one of the dining room chairs, turning the letter over to study the thick build-up of wax on the seal.

"You open it," Jack urged, and Will passed his thumb under the wax, popping it open. His heard was palpitating at the thought of what he'd find since the last note, and he numbly wondered if he should see a doctor. Heart palpitations couldn't be healthy.

This time, violet hyacinth petals fell into his palm, followed by white tulips. Like before, they were freshly bruised, recently ripped from the stem where they'd taken the first of their last breaths. He turned his palm over, let them drop to the table, and he opened the letter.

Dear Will,

Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat

So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more—
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.

Yours,

-C.R.

"Did he kill someone again?" Will asked quietly, setting the letter down. He slid it to Jack whose eyes cut across it, devouring each line hungrily.

"Yes," Jack replied once he finished the letter. Will shook his head and buried his face in his hands dismally.

"I told you," he said, voice muffled.

"Why didn't you bring these to me?" Jack asked, gesturing to the small pile of them. Accusation riddled his tone an ugly shade of red.

"You accused me of being the Chesapeake Ripper the first time. I didn't think you'd listen." Will said, lifting his head.

"I'm listening. I've got a man with no face kneeling before a cross with a note in his palm that has your name on it," Jack said heavily.

"He's apologizing," Will realized after a moment. His mind reeled, hungry for the image he'd see when he faced the corpse, terrified at what it'd reveal. He shoved the hunger down, down, down.

"He's apologizing for the murders?" Jack asked skeptically.

"He cornered me in an alley the other night, and he had a knife to me. At the last second, he pulled away. Maybe he knows how much it scared me, maybe he knows how…'wrong' it was. He's come here before to apologize, but I wasn't home and he blames himself."

"Do you mind telling me why you didn't call the cops then?" Jack growled.

"He knows enough about me that I thought he'd kill me if I did," Will retorted. "Have you ever been hunted by a serial killer, Jack Crawford?"

“Plenty of times,” Jack assured him, eyes darkening. He studied Will across the table, and whatever he found beneath the hair and the surface of his skin, he didn’t quite like. “Would it help if I apologized? We should have listened. *I* should have listened to you. I looked you up afterwards; top of the class in forensics and criminology, and your professors say you have a knack for seeing things that no one else in their classes can see.”

“Yes,” Will agreed reluctantly.

“You have been able to reconstruct cases that were considered long dead, used as examples of cold case files, and in one of your reports, a theory was used that led to the capture of a serial killer over in North Dakota.”

“…Yes.”

“I also spoke with your old therapist.” Jack steepled his fingers and surveyed Will critically. “She said you were too smart for the therapy because you kept seeing through the techniques and deemed them useless.”

“Yes.”

“At twelve-years-old,” Jack added curtly.

“…Yes.”

“She said your empathy disorder made you so utterly disgusted with yourself that you could identify with literally anyone in the room, and your lack of stable barriers made their thoughts and ideals your own, so much so that you were afraid you were just as capable at killing as the boy that brought a gun to school in your tenth grade year.”

“Aren’t there laws about doctor-patient confidentiality?” Will asked snidely.

“You gave her express consent to discuss your therapy when you were sixteen-years-old, after that shooting,” Jack replied easily. “Now, you’ve got five personalized letters from a killer I’ve been hunting for years. The Chesapeake Ripper cornered you in an alley, and when he could have made you his next victim, he instead is sending you flowers and apology letters.” If Jack’s voice grew any louder, it’d be considered shouting. Will wondered if he pointed that it, Jack would lower his voice.

Probably not.

“I tried to tell you,” Will said, staring at the pile of letters.

“Yes, you did. Your old therapist said that you were on the spectrum.”

“More along the line of autistics and Asperger’s than narcissists and psychopaths,” Will tried to assure him.

“Your mind makes leaps no one can follow; you saw the Chesapeake Ripper’s message to you before anyone else could.”

“I’d just call it an over active imagination, nothing more or less,” said Will reluctantly.

“I’d like to borrow that imagination, Will. The Chesapeake Ripper is interested in you, and I need your help to understand why.”

“You can take the letters, but I don’t want any part of this,” Will said, holding his hands up and out. “I can’t say he won’t kill me for even talking to you right now.”

“You’d have an FBI escort to ensure nothing happened to you,” Jack pointed out.

“No, I just…I just want to be left alone.” After a beat, he added, “By all of you.” Will was ashamed at how his voice cracked, vulnerable. Jack nodded, and Will wasn’t sure if it was in understanding, or because he felt Will needed the validation.

“Just take one look, tell me what you see, and I’ll make sure everyone leaves you the hell alone.”

That is how Will Graham found himself escorted in a ritzy car to the FBI HQ, placed before a table full of photos and shots of the deaths that’d occurred ‘in his name’. His hands passed over the smooth texture of each photo, and he thought of the way it’d felt to be pressed up against the wall in the dank, foul alley. It’d been terrifying –that much was obvious. Alcohol made things swim, emotions that floated about before surfacing after they had the time to be softened, mulled over for a while. He tried to focus on the terror rather than the pleasure, the fear rather than the excitement. He wasn’t sure if the pleasure and excitement he recalled were his or the Chesapeake Ripper’s.

The man in the photos knelt before the cross at one of the churches, an old, catholic one by the looks of it. It would have been almost spiritual, if he’d had a face. Beside the photo, the note they’d pried from his hands held Will’s name in familiar, arching script.

“It’s nice paper,” Will commented.

“We checked the paper and the ink. Although nice, there are several boutique stores in the entire surrounding area that sell it, and even most chains can get their hands on it,” Jack grunted. When they’d arrived, he’d cleared the room of anyone lurking about. The older man, Price, had given Will a thumb’s up before clearing out, and Will wasn’t sure if it was a vote of confidence or a gesture of good will.

Maybe good luck, since Price felt that he needed it.

“What’s he do?”

“Have you read the papers?”

“Some. None of them look the same, go to the same places, or have anything remotely in common with one another until he decides they all belong in his collection.”

Jack stared at Will, and Will avoided his gaze. He plucked at a photo, staring at Persephone walking towards Hades. Was the Ripper telling him he offered a life of ruling

within the darkness? He wanted to court him with the flowers, show him just what he could do for him, and when he went too far, he apologized. Maybe he had been moments from death in that alley, and then the Ripper decided he wasn't done playing yet.

The thought made his palms sweat.

"He decides they belong in his collection," Jack repeated when Will said nothing else. "Is the collection ongoing from the past years, or is each one new?"

"Each one is different and unique. Usually he works in sounders of three or so, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"I wonder why." Will slid three of the photos together: the courtship, Persephone, and the apology. "If he's sticking to that rule, he's finished."

"Do *you* think he's finished?"

"No," Will murmured. "Why sounders of three?"

"Timing? Ease?" Jack thought out loud.

"I wonder." Will frowned down at the photos, waiting for them to tell him.

"Where he didn't kill you, then his plan, whatever that is, continues."

"He could have killed me in that alley, and instead he's apologizing. He knows I went to you with the first letter, so he gave you a reason to come and see the rest," Will said.

"So he's playing with us," Jack realized, and Will nodded, glancing up.

"The apology is for me because he almost killed me and he wants to drag this out however he can. He wants me, but he doesn't want to…end me. If he only wanted to apologize, he would have just sent a note, seeing as how not every note is a death, although every poem is. He wanted you to see, though."

"See what, exactly?"

"The reason why he's interested in me." Will tapped the photo of the kneeling man, his face missing. "That's him. You can't see his face because he's the Chesapeake Ripper, but he believes I can see the man behind the face."

"Because of your…imagination?" Jack pressed.

"Yes."

"Will you look at the body?"

“I don’t want to see the body.” Will shook his head sharply, pressing his hand flat to the photo. It was a lie, but at the same time it was also not a lie in the least.

“I just want you to look.”

“Normal people don’t want to see dead bodies,” Will retorted.

“There’s nothing wrong with looking to see if you see something that no one else does.”

“I can look, but the…the thinking will shut down. I don’t want to see him.” Will’s fingers tapped on the photo, and he glanced to the faceless man, throat dry. “I don’t.”

“You don’t want to see him because it’s a dead body or is it because you don’t want to see the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“Both. The second.” Definitely the second. Logic told him that it wasn’t the Chesapeake Ripper, that the Ripper certainly wasn’t finished with him, but the idea of inhaling the pungent smell of dead flesh and chemicals and staring at a face with no skin made his heart palpitate again –definitely needed to see a doctor.

“I *need* you to see, Will.” Jack said, and the words were clear: there wasn’t really a choice in the matter.

Will followed him to the adjoining room, the wall of body slabs metallic and clean to belie the foul things they hid inside. Jack opened one and hauled out the gurney, leaving Will with the gristly visage of a very dead man. Will wanted to close his eyes, but he forced himself to stare. The flesh was dingy, an ugly shade of grey.

“Death does not look good on you,” Will said quietly.

“You did a paper on intelligent psychopaths once that made your teacher post it in one of the school’s journals. You emphasized how difficult they were to catch because there is no traceable motive or rhyme and reason. They change methods; they are meticulous and tidy. This is the first time the Chesapeake Ripper has given us anything to go on, and it’s you. You’re his motive, and whatever he’s seeing when he looks at you is manifesting on these people.”

“He wants to understand me, and he wants to be understood,” Will said.

“What?”

“He thinks there’s something worthwhile in my mind. The Chesapeake Ripper is, above all, arrogant. He knows you won’t catch him. That’s why he’s toying with you. He…” Will gestured to the body, eyes glued to the man’s distinct lack of face. “He knows you won’t catch him because he leaves nothing but what he wants you to see and understand. That lends itself a certain isolation, though, doesn’t it?”

“Isolation?”

“The only person that knows who the Chesapeake Ripper is, is the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“You think the Chesapeake Ripper is *lonely*?” Derision colored Crawford’s word black.

“If you were the only one in the world that knew why you did what you did, wouldn’t you be lonely too?” Will asked. “A face that no one can see, and he thinks he’s found someone that could maybe understand.”

“You have a knack for understanding the monsters,” Jack said after a beat.

“I can understand anyone,” Will snapped. “Monsters, normal people, the ones that think they’re normal when they’re not.”

“He only cares about the fact that you can see him, though.”

Will nodded in agreement, and he finally tore his gaze away from the man’s sinew and muscle.

“I wonder why three,” he said.

“They were sounders of three before, but not now. Not if he’s just getting started,” Jack replied. Will nodded in agreement. If he was going to be left to live through whatever the Chesapeake Ripper had in store, then it was natural to assume other people were going to continue getting hurt.

There’d been a steady tapping noise in the background, and it was only when Jack walked away with him that he realized he’d been tapping fingers on the metal, just centimeters away from taking the man’s hand.

-

Will was kindly let go from his job at Sangre.

Somehow, amidst his penchant for avoiding eyes and remaining aloof, his bosses felt he was too much the ‘kicked puppy’ that people just felt the need to take home. He wasn’t quite sure how to take that critique –it came down to aesthetics rather than true criticism of his work ethic –but he handed in his itchy red vest and bowtie all the same.

He was just leaving the bar when Hannibal was walking in, and he was unable to meet the doctor’s eyes when they both stopped.

“Off work so early, Will?” Hannibal asked.

“I was fired,” Will said, studying the cracks on the sidewalk. He wondered if Hannibal cared about avoiding the cracks in the cement as much as he did.

“Fired?” Hannibal’s brows lifted and he shifted his stance. “What was their reasoning?”

“Apparently there is some sort of endearing quality to my face that just doesn’t sell.”

“I wasn’t aware that you had to work at selling alcohol. Don’t the consumers gladly come to you?”

“That’s what I thought.” Will scuffed his shoe on the sidewalk and looked up, eyes finding their way to Hannibal’s shoulder. “Back on the market, I suppose.”

“Are you going to attempt to remain within the service industry?”

“I’ve been told that I know how to make a really good Old Fashioned.”

“That you do,” Hannibal agreed.

“Should I pass along another message to someone here for you?” It was a teasing sort of question, something that bordered along the lines of almost flirtatious. Will instantly regretted it, willing himself to pull the words back into his mouth.

“Have you eaten yet?” Hannibal asked instead.

“What?” Will managed to find his way to his face, surprised to see a pleasant smile. The sunlight made his eyes tawny, and they were fixed very decidedly on Will.

“I’d imagine you haven’t had dinner. Allow me to pour the drinks for you instead.”

“Oh, Dr. Lecter, I couldn’t…”

“You’ve just lost a second job, and I would be remiss to see you go hungry because you forgot to eat in your haste to find a new occupation. It’s the least I can do.”

Maybe it was the way his expression was mischievous rather than piteous, or the fact that when Will looked at his feet, he saw that Hannibal wasn’t standing on any cracks in the cement. It could have been that he’d already been rung out and left to air dry by Jack just a few days before, or maybe it was because there was something vastly appealing about someone cooking dinner for him when they most certainly didn’t have to.

“Okay," he said, and the word gave him a small bolster of courage. "...Okay."

Chapter End Notes

You guys are just so fantastic, did you know that? Thank you so much for your feedback, both here and on tumblr, and for making this one of the best fandoms I've ever been part of! I came for the cannibals, stayed for the community :)

On the same note, you can connect with me on tumblr at elfnerdherder. Asks, prompts, or just general conversation more than welcomed!

Pinot Noir 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 5: Pinot Noir 2

Hannibal's house was a little under an hour away from DC, a fact that he'd politely neglected to mention until Will saw them leave the city. He'd thought about protesting since Hannibal would have to drive him back, but once again, the idea of someone else handling things, even for a moment, seemed relaxing in an almost drug-inducing way. He really needed to find a way to destress.

He really needed to find a way to get the Chesapeake Ripper to stop sending him letters without dying in the process.

He played classical music, and Will reveled in it, the soft notes lulling and relaxing. He leaned back against the leather of the chair, eyes closed.

"Do you always ride your bike?" Hannibal had asked, helping him load it into the vehicle.

"I have a three-generation Subaru, but it's parked in the garage of the complex. Way past its prime until it snows or I'm desperate."

After that, a lull in conversation that didn't seem forced or uncomfortable. Maybe that's why he'd agreed? In all of his time serving Hannibal, not every moment had been exhausted with words. In at least two years, he could maybe fill a few chapters of a book with what'd been exchanged between them. Not having to fill the silence was nice.

In the farthest corner of his mind, he hoped Hannibal followed him to the next gig he got, but he wasn't going to bet on it.

Dr. Lecter's house was a modest Tudor style with a wraparound driveway. The entry was deep, rich tones, and following him towards the kitchen, Will stopped several times to admire the oil paintings on the wall. There were several sculptures of stags, elk, and all manner of woodsy things, a mild cross between a cultured and sophisticated art aficionado and a poised lumberjack. The air held the same scent as Hannibal did –something electric and oaky, an expensive cologne but a nice one none-the-less

The kitchen was granite, steel, and taupe, everything cleaned and in its own meticulous place. Hannibal instantly began the preparations to cook, leaving Will to hover by the chopping table, fingers passing over the wood idly.

"I appreciate you being so willing to travel for your meal," Hannibal said, gathering his ingredients. "I've been smoking liver on wood chips all day, and I supposed correctly that I'd made too much.

“Smoked liver?”

“Are you not a fan of liver?” Hannibal looked back from the pantry he was stepping into, poised to turn around.

“I’ve never had it,” he said, and Hannibal disappeared into the pantry. He came back with a bottle of red wine, and he made quick work of uncorking it and letting it breathe.

“Then I am glad to be your first experience,” he said, and maybe it was the way he peered over at Will while he poured two glasses of wine, or maybe it was the way his lip curled, but Will decided that he was *definitely* hoping Hannibal decided to follow him to his next job, whatever that may be. It was a dangerous sort of thought, indeed.

He tried to help, but Hannibal deposited him on a stool to watch as he worked, insisting that it was his treat. His skill with the blade as he diced, chopped, and minced was phenomenal, and by the time he finished, Will’s mouth was watering at the smells. He was escorted to a cobalt blue dining room with fresh herbs and plants growing along one of the walls, and he couldn’t help but gape, the fireplace lit to a sharp crackle of ambience that made him tap fingertips along his thigh absentmindedly, leisurely.

“Stuffed roast heart, deviled kidneys, and smoked liver with fresh greens,” Hannibal said, setting the plate in front of him. Will stared down at it, then to the large wine glass presented. “I thought this particular pinot noir would lend itself to the meal.”

“It smells amazing,” Will said, leaning in. He noted Hannibal watching him intently. “Do you often use a lot of meat in your meals?”

“This is no herbivore’s dinner, Will. Tonight, this is an ode to the carnivores.”

“I don’t even know how you made all of this,” Will said with a short laugh, “and I watched the entire thing.”

“Cooking is my pleasure, and I’m always happy to share with friends.” Friends. At some point, the descriptor had shifted from acquaintances to friends.

“Thank you,” he said, and Hannibal nodded.

“I do hope you like it. I’m rather particular about what I eat, which is why I don’t often eat out. I prepare almost all of my meals, if I can help it.”

“If I could cook like this, I would too,” Will agreed. He cut the smoked liver, taking a small bite. The flavor was rich, heady and delicious, and he nodded in appreciation, taking a sip of wine after. “I’ve decided that I’m a fan of liver.”

“It was from a particularly stout pig, so I’m glad it appeals to you.” Hannibal watched him take a few more bites before he began to eat, cutting his food with delicate precision. A small smirk graced his mouth, something self-satisfying and secret. He ate European style, tines down, and Will found himself mimicking the action, small bites with small cuts.

“I confess that I have a question for you,” Hannibal said, glancing up at him. Will managed to return the stare, although he had to take a full gulp of his drink after.

“Okay.”

“When you speak with people, does the degree of your unease determine whether or not you begin to mimic their speech patterns, or is it through a natural course of time?”

“What do you mean?” Will asked uneasily.

“When I spoke with you about your secret admirer, the more uneasy you became, the more your words and flow of conversation matched mine. When a woman at the table near mine continued to engage with you flirtatiously, you matched her tone and influx, although the words differed as you ultimately rejected her advances. I was curious if your melding of yourself with another was a direct correlation to stress or not.”

“I try not to,” Will admitted after a moment. He took another sip of wine to steady himself. “Someone once accused me of making fun of them.”

“Yes, I noticed when you attempted to force yourself to speak another way. You do realize it, although you can’t entirely help it.” Hannibal held the glass poised in the air, allowing the muted light to strike the color, rendering the rich plum a glowing red.

“Just how much do you notice about me?” Will asked. It was a dangerous question; he wanted an honest answer as much as he wanted Hannibal to change the subject.

“Perhaps too much,” Hannibal admitted after a moment.

“It doesn’t bother you to say it, though.”

“Does it bother you?” Hannibal asked, looking at him. “At times it does, that much I know.”

“Is this where you tell me that you can’t help it?” Will’s lip quirked, and Hannibal laughed lightly. It was a clipped sort of sound, something that seemed to hold back so much more.

“I certainly can help myself. I choose not to.” At Will’s shocked laugh, he continued, “In reality, small talk is what creates bridges between people, the repetitious connection that they use as stepping stones to the more in-depth discussions that ultimately create lasting relationships. I have never been adept at the inanities of it. Why use such faux manners of speech when you can leap directly to the heart of your intended discussion?”

“No, you go right for the ‘How was lab, Will? I noticed you wore the same trousers as your last shift, and you’d mentioned having to be there for a fifteen hour time period.’”

“You remember that?” Hannibal asked, surprised. “That was a conversation from some time ago.”

"…I remember a lot of things," Will said reluctantly. He focused on his food, not wanting to admit that he remembered most of their conversations. Eidetic memory was sometimes a curse.

"You are not so good at small talk either," Hannibal noted, and Will felt his gaze burning on him. He studiously refused to look up.

"I'm not," Will agreed after he swallowed a mouthful of food.

"And yet something broaching deeper, darker waters leaves you drumming your fingers and glancing about for an exit, an almost panicked expression in your eyes."

"I guess that's why I keep getting fired," Will replied dryly.

"Someone of your personality doesn't belong in customer service –at least, not in this country. Americans expect a cashier to stand for eight hours in one place, scanning items, and at the mention of a chair, they have such a panic at the presumed laziness. They expect a retail employee to run about grabbing items that they could retrieve themselves, bending their back to make a simple sale, and they expect you to both serve drinks and become friends with every single person that walks through the door, no matter how disrespectful or rude they are."

"I think you just endeared yourself to every millennial that ever had to work in customer service," Will said.

"I have a rather low tolerance for the rude," Hannibal informed him, cutting into a kidney with enthusiasm. "They have a certain sort of…taste about them."

"You'd really love the FBI agent that I spoke with, then," said Will thoughtfully, then stopped. The thought of the Chesapeake Ripper soured the meal, tainted it with the blood and blasé manner in which he dealt life and death.

"When he accused you of being the Chesapeake Ripper?" Hannibal inquired.

"…Yeah." He didn't want to mention the second meeting, the third death. The way he'd woken up that night, bathed in sweat and terror as he stared into the faceless man's empty eye sockets, blood dripping steadily onto his lips. Nightmares came with the territory of seeing so much more than he'd ever wanted to, left him convulsing with tremors as he fought to get control of himself. Normally, two fingers of whiskey did the trick, followed by background noise of Netflix, but that was on a good day. Days where the only face he could see was the one representing his secret admirer were not good days.

"How is your secret admirer, by the way?" Hannibal asked.

"Still a secret," Will murmured.

After dinner, Hannibal made two Old Fashioned's, cutting the rinds with skilled precision. He deposited Will in a comfortable leather chair before the fireplace in his study, and he lifted his glass in cheers, taking a sip. Will smiled a little, buzzed from the wine before

dinner and the wine during, turning his drink around in his hand so that he could watch the firelight through it.

"Do you bring all of your patients to your house for a drink?" he joked lightly.

"Do you consider yourself my patient?" Hannibal wondered. He stood by the fireplace, watching Will with the firelight silhouetting his back, streaks of gold and russet red flickering along his shoulders.

"I don't know what I'd call us," he said, taking a long drink. He got a third of it down and nodded appreciatively at the taste, the citrus undertone sharp on his tongue.

"Because we haven't had enough small talk, or because you are evasive of anything more?"

"Because I'm pretty sure you're at least ten years older than I am," said Will, glancing from his drink to Hannibal.

"Is age so terrifying a thing for you?"

"I've heard enough from friends to learn from their mishaps rather than make the same disastrous mistakes. Age difference…doesn't really work out in the younger person's favor. It's messy." Were they really having this conversation? Was Will really being so bold? It was the alcohol; Hannibal had a rather good collection of it.

"It doesn't have to be. The first step to dooming a situation is declaring it as doomed in the first place." Hannibal sipped his drink, studying Will. Be it the firelight or the shadows it cast on his face, but there was a hungry, primal edge to him, finely honed and delicious. Will took another long drink, pressing his back to the chair. His eyes fell to Hannibal's dress shoes, gaze fastened to the way the tweed slacks fell at just the right angle against them. The man was as meticulous as Will was rumpled.

"And what would you call the 'it' that does or does not have to be doomed?"

"Whatever you'd like it to be, Will," Hannibal said lightly. "Labels were created to give comfort to those that are unsure of themselves or their existence and place in this world. I harbor no such reservations of who I am or where I stand."

The fire popped cheerfully behind him, and Will glanced to it before his eyes flickered up towards Hannibal's face, holding his impassive stare. The silence surrounded them, curling like a well-snapped whip, and Will stood and finished his drink, the alcohol warm in his stomach. Call it liquid courage, call it the heady sense of recklessness, but he crossed the room at a slow, leisurely pace and stopped just before Hannibal, the tips of his shoes a whisper from what had to be Italian leather.

"I have a habit of ruining the foundations of something that could be a good thing," he revealed, voice dropping.

“Previous friends and lovers alike destroyed with their perceptions of your apathy when in reality you merely lacked the ability to convey affection in a way they’d understand,” Hannibal noted, and Will nodded slowly, gaze fastened to his lips.

“Their faces connected to faces of others I’d rather forget.”

“No stable barriers in the bone arena of your skull?” Hannibal murmured, matching his tone.

“None.”

“Associations that follow you well away from the physical connection, aligning themselves with your true feelings until you can’t determine what is yours and what belongs to someone else?”

“It disgusts me,” Will said, and Hannibal’s head dipped down, the slightest of space left between them.

“Shocked at your feelings, horrified at the associations. How could you see such ghastly things and understand them so intimately?” The heat burned off of Hannibal, and it seared Will, made his breath catch at the sudden *need* that gripped him. He wanted to touch, to take.

“How do you see me?” Will wondered.

“I imagine your peers have handled you as fine china, brought out only for special occasions and held with care. Used gently, hand washed and returned to the curio to collect dust until the next parlor trick.” The hand not currently occupied with a drink lifted and glided just along Will’s jaw, sliding into his curls. Will’s eyes flickered closed, opened lazily.

“I want to know what *you* think, though.”

“You are the mongoose I want under the house for when the snakes slither by,” said Hannibal. Will laughed a little, teeth bared.

“Not the most romantic thing I’ve heard.”

“You’re not here for romance,” Hannibal said huskily.

“What am I here for?” Will challenged.

“You’re here because you can’t quiet your mind, and for just the briefest of moments, you’d like someone else to take control. You’d like to turn off the mirrors that reflect the world around you and amplify within your head until you can’t see reality anymore.”

Will balked under the words said with such poise, such ease. Was his mind stripped bare so quickly? Was he so easily reduced to a summary, a psyche-eval? Hannibal tilted his head back and finished his drink, the space between them distorted by the glass and the amber liquid within. He took both glasses and disappeared from the room, leaving Will before the fire with mercury sizzling in his veins.

Will heard his steps as he returned, but he made no move to turn and acknowledge him. He didn't have to. Hannibal walked closer, and his body ghosted behind Will's, almost there but not quite. If Will leaned back, he'd be pressed against him, and he knew without having to *know* that it would be the sort of invitation to forget everything for a short while, let someone else take command and see all of the ugly things inside without fear or reluctance. He tucked his hands into his pockets, and he swallowed heavily, a breath away from leaning back, a breath away from falling forward.

"I think," Hannibal said, voice caressing his ear, "that I should return you to your home."

"Did I scare you, Dr. Lecter?"

"On the contrary, I think you scared yourself." Hannibal's hand lifted to his shoulder, squeezed gently and slid along his shirt, pausing just over the space the Chesapeake Ripper had made his horrendous suck mark. He touch lingered, then lifted, and he headed towards the door. "I'll get my keys."

The ride back was quiet. Be it the elevated pulse that refused to calm no matter how long he sat, or the heat from the alcohol that lurked just under his skin, but the ride was faster, and with directions from Will, Hannibal pulled into a parking space at his apartment complex. He put the car in park and looked to Will, expression veiled in the darkness of the vehicle.

"Thanks," Will said, getting out of the car. Hannibal helped him get his bike out of the back, the awkward maneuvering causing hands to fumble and bump into one another before he stood straight, the bent and structured metal the best sort of barrier he could have at the moment. Hannibal closed the trunk and studied him, eyes unnervingly steady.

"Do try to get a good night's rest, Will," he said. "If I've made you uncomfortable-"

"You haven't," Will assured him quickly.

"I was thinking about your loss of sleep, and I have an idea, if you'd like to hear it." Will wheeled his bike up to the sidewalk, and he paused, looking to Hannibal poised at the driver's side door of the car.

"I would."

"You use a particular aftershave with a pungent smell. Sometimes smells leave us with something, an after-effect of headaches, dizziness, associations of circumstances."

"What's my aftershave have to do my dreams?" Will wondered, confused.

"It smells like something with a ship on the bottle. If you're having bad dreams, I'd recommend changing the aftershave."

He got into his car and drove away, leaving Will puzzled, a little drunk, and more than a little confused.

He told himself he was confused due to the mention of his aftershave and not because he’d been a breath away from sleeping with an older man.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for the support both here and on tumblr. Seriously I cannot stress how amazing this fandom is and how much fun I'm having. Your guys' feedback has seriously inspired me, and I literally...cannot even.

You can connect with me on tumblr as elfnerdherder :) I don't bite.

Chardonnay

Chapter 6: Chardonnay

"An FBI agent was looking for you," Beverly said, sitting outside of a bagel shop.

"He was probably going to ask me about you," Will replied evasively. The Bagel Shop was just that –a bagel shop. They used bagels rather than bread, and somehow that made it unique, as well as expensive. The bagels were delicious, though. He bit into one affectionately coined as 'Donkey Punch' and used the large bite to avoid elaborating.

"I've still got some time before they start doing that. I haven't even applied yet," Beverly said. "They're crawling around on campus, asking questions. Maybe they got a hold of your last paper on reconstructing forensics and wanted to talk to you."

"We're just in college. I'm sure if they wanted real insight, they'd ask a professional."

"Yeah, maybe you're right." Beverly took a bite and spoke around the food. "Guess I can't even call you a professional bartender, can I?"

"I got a new job," said Will, looking across the street. It was a much more upscale bar, no one over the age of forty sitting among the chairs unless accompanied by a far younger, supple female. He was strictly to work at the bar, not leaving his post unless told to. A week into training and he hadn't seen Hannibal show up; he wasn't sure whether to be pleased or utterly disappointed by the fact. He must have royally butchered dinner.

"I can't come crash this one in petticoats, can I?"

"I'd rather you didn't. I'm going to try and keep this one," Will said, and maybe if he said it with more feeling, it'd be true.

"I went to Sangre after you were let go; why hadn't you told me they fired you?" He looked away from the woman arguing on her cell phone and studied Beverly's hands, clenched around a bagel whose insides were spilling out.

"I forgot," he said honestly.

"Well…I wasn't the only one you'd forgotten to tell. I left, and a man stopped me and asked about you. He was cute, in an older, not-quite-your-dad-but-the-cool-young-uncle sort of way." He could feel the grin ruminating in her words. "You got a boyfriend, Will?"

"What'd he say?" Will asked, looking up to her face.

"He asked if I knew you, asked if you'd found new work yet…that kind of thing. I said I didn't even know you'd gotten fired, and he sympathized with the plight of a friend left out of the loop." Beverly stared him down, eyebrow raised expectantly.

"I *forgot*," he emphasized weakly. "I'm sorry."

"He said he was a regular of yours. Dr. Hannibal Lecter. You getting something on the side you're not telling me?" Her grin was wicked.

"We had dinner, but nothing else," he said, and Beverly cackled.

"He's an older guy, Will. I didn't know you were into that!"

"I don't know what I'm into." Will said defensively. "It doesn't matter, it was…it was stupid. I haven't seen him since."

That sobered her up. Be it his tone or his picking apart of the top of the bagel, she took another bite of hers and left him to his thoughts, allowing him to marinade in how much he supposed he'd messed up. He should have pressed back against him, given him the silent okay. He should have let Hannibal turn his mind off, leave him to the machinations of autopilot, of action and reaction. Maybe Hannibal sensed how much it wouldn't have helped, though. He was a doctor, after all. He saw more of Will than even Will saw.

"Well, he seemed interested enough to stop me outside of Sangre and ask about you. He said he hoped you were doing well." Beverly found the right words, the tone of teasing gone.

"I am," Will replied.

"Are you?" Beverly asked. "Really, Will; are you okay?"

He didn't have an answer to that. He finished his food, grabbed his backpack and headed to lab, wondering if Hannibal would show up to Hollin's when he worked the next night.

-

Dear Will,

I wonder if your penchant for shifting from occupation to occupation is a sign of mental duress, or mental instability. Certainly your future career goals working on forensics and criminology indicate the potential for psychopathic tendencies, but then again, my own thoughts and work lend themselves to a darker, less savory side of the world.

You've been dwelling within your own mind while you walk from class to class. If I hadn't intervened yesterday, you'd have stepped into oncoming traffic. Am I your Keeper, Will?

Yours,

-C.R.

Enclosed, the flower petals from the garden just outside of his lab had been hastily torn, as though they were an afterthought. Had he been randomly touched with inspiration, thinking himself remarkably clever? Will thought back to the day before, but he couldn't remember any such moment where someone saved him from the incoming blow of a vehicle. Then again, much of his days were blurs, rain drops smearing the windowpane as he went about in a sort of slump. Someone had shouted, and he'd turned, but no one shouted *to* him. Maybe the Chesapeake Ripper used someone to call out, to raise their voice just loud enough that he'd be pulled from his muddled thoughts. He used people like an artist used paint and a canvas –maybe this was no different.

He called Jack Crawford, and it went to voicemail.

"Hey, Jack…it's Will. Will Graham. I got another letter, but it's not a poem. I don't think there's a body, but he said he saw me on campus, so…maybe a campus student? Maybe a teacher or professor? I don't know. I'm still thinking about the sounders of three. I wonder why three."

He couldn't figure out why three, but he did figure that maybe Jack could look at campus cameras and see if anyone popped into view.

-

Hollin's had velvet drapes of sapphire and gold walls. The panes on the chandelier were rust-colored to mute the light, and a faint orchestra played the classics. Will was strapped into a cummerbund of garnet with a matching bowtie, and after a week working the bar, he decided that out of all of his jobs, this one was the finest. The people that went to Hollin's didn't want to become the bartender's friend. They were there for business or pleasure, and they brought along both in enough supply that they didn't have to rely on him to fill in the gaps. They just wanted their drinks, and he was happy to oblige.

"You changed your aftershave," Hannibal said, and Will had to focus on not gaping at him. He slid onto the barstool with ease, jacket in hand, and underneath the lowlight from above, his eyes were maroon.

"I did," Will agreed. It'd cost a pretty damn penny to do, but the associates at the boutique assured him that the woodsy scent did nothing but provide a base to accentuate his already bold smell. He hadn't thought to see Hannibal again, so he'd felt no danger in doing it. Now, he felt foolish, and he shifted his weight from foot to foot, glancing about to make sure no other patrons needed a drink.

"Has it helped your sleep?" Hannibal asked.

"I don't think it's the aftershave," he said. Hannibal nodded thoughtfully.

"It is a vast improvement. Rather than drown your natural tones, it enhances them."

"I didn't realize you were so passionate about my smell, Dr. Lecter," Will said, reaching for a wine bottle. He held it up for Hannibal's critique, and at the small, pleased nod he worked at uncorking it.

“I have a sensitive nose, and the synthetic, artificial notes do nothing to ease my burden.” Will was acutely aware of Hannibal’s gaze on him as he worked, and he ducked his head. He wasn’t sure whether or not to be nervous or excited; probably a bit of both.

“Well, hopefully this chardonnay helps,” he said, setting the glass before him. Hannibal looked to it, then flicked his gaze back to Will.

“A good choice. I smell oak, pear, and the lightest bit of melon.”

“Beverly told me that she ran into you,” Will said, and Hannibal took a sip of the wine, savoring it. When he didn’t answer, Will walked over to a new customer and quickly made their martini, his skin buzzing insistently at him. Having not seen Hannibal since that night, his presence at Will’s new place of work was almost as exhilarating as it was dreadful. What was he to say? How was he supposed to act?

“I had the pleasure of meeting Beverly Katz, although I hadn’t realized the two of you were friends until she told me as much. I wasn’t aware you’d neglected to tell her you’d gotten fired.”

“I forgot,” Will said irritably.

“A fact she said she’d bury you with,” Hannibal said gravely.

“She did.”

“Did she mention our conversation?” Hannibal asked curiously.

“She did that, too. She said you were attractive.”

Hannibal laughed, and Will smiled a little at the ease of it. He rolled his shoulders back, conscious of his borrowed dress shirt and not-so borrowed trousers. One fit like it belonged against someone else’s skin, and the other needed replaced soon.

“She was rather sharp. I like her,” Hannibal decided, and he nursed his drink as Will left to help a few more people, one of the men ruddy in the face and loud. Will watered his drink down, avoiding his eyes as he slumped against the bar.

“We were so, *so* close to that deal!” he exclaimed, and the woman with him soothingly rubbed his shoulder. “No, no, just…no. You, hey,” the man gestured towards Hannibal, and he looked up with a placid expression.

“Yes?”

“You see the bill that just passed in congress? You see that shit?”

“I did,” Hannibal said, and his eyes ghosted towards Will’s uncomfortable expression before shifting back to the man.

“It’s shit, right? I mean, it’s…c’mere, it’s…” The man slid closer to Hannibal, and in an effort to grab onto him, he knocked the chardonnay over, spilling it everwhere. Will

grabbed a damp rag and hurried over, making eye contact with the manager and giving a solemn shake of his head.

Hannibal was not so nonplussed. He leaned away from the spilt drink and the man's eager hands, his brows lifting but not twisting to anger.

"Do you normally drink so much, or are you merely upset at this particular bill passing?"

"This is shit! I work in congress, and when I say that is a shit bill, that is a *shit* bill…" He stumbled back and fell onto the barstool beside Hannibal, forehead damp with sweat.

"You work in congress? Do you, perhaps, have a card? When you're not inebriated, I should like to pick your brain on the matter." Will shook his head, mystified as the man produced a business card, Hannibal's voice and words a spell woven around his head. The manager appeared with a security guard, and the man bobbed his head towards them mulishly.

"I'm f-fine, I don't have to…it's fine, guys," he said, waving them off.

"You should apologize to the waiter," Hannibal suggested. "He has to clean up your mess."

"It's fine, isn't it? It's…it's fine," the man said, and Will delicately picked up the wine glass, wiping the bar down without looking up.

"Come on, Mr. Newsun, let's go," the manager said, and they hauled him off of the stool, leading him towards the exit. In the wake of his energy and his drunkenness, the rest of the bar seemed too quiet, too open. A few customers stared, uncomfortable, and Will hesitated a moment too long before going back to Mr. Newsun's party. The group of people with him quickly settled their tabs and left, murmuring amongst themselves, and Will tossed their untouched drinks in the sink. The room was still too quiet.

"Will, make sure everyone gets a drink on the house, alright?" The manager walked back in and flashed him a smile, phone in hand. Will nodded and deposited the rag back in the sink, drying off the counter in front of Hannibal with a new one.

"I'm sorry," he said, pouring him another glass of wine. Hannibal smiled, tucking the business card into his jacket pocket.

"He was quite rude," he said.

"You hate the rude," Will remembered, and Hannibal accepted the glass of wine from him, taking a sip.

"In a world of so many vast possibilities, cruelties, and inhumanities we face, the least we can do is be polite to one another," he said, lips poised over the edge of his glass. "Do you often apologize for the mistakes of others?"

“It’s good business, or so I’m told,” said Will, folding the small towel and hanging it up.

“I wonder how many people you allow to push you about for the sake of good business. Are your professors able to bully you into doing something, simply because you’re able to empathize with their desires?”

“What are you, my keeper?” Will snapped, and the words burst between them, aimed to smart and sting. Hannibal paused, and he tilted his head, much like a predator would. Will closed his eyes, counted back from ten, and opened them, staring at the flared bottom of the wine glass.

“Am I your keeper,” Hannibal mused quietly.

“I’m sorry, that wasn’t…that was rude,” Will said to the wine glass. “You’ve been nothing but polite, I’m just…” He was what? Haunted by dreams where a man pressed a knife against him in an alleyway and he liked it? Drowned by flower petals of foxglove and nightshade? Reaching for a branch in the shape of a hand, only to find death waiting on the other side?

“You’re just exhausted,” Hannibal supplied, and Will nodded, swallowing heavily.

“I’m afraid to dream,” he said, “and I dream now more than ever.”

“A place where you were once able to sever control and allow something else to hold a dominant force over you now holds you captive within your thoughts. Is it your secret admirer?”

Will nodded, a short, jerking thing, much like the cut strings of a marionette.

“He followed me on campus the other day. He…every time I’m alone, I look over my shoulder, but I don’t see anything. Every time I wake up in the morning, I wonder if he’s going to be looming over me. I don’t know what he wants. I shouldn’t take that…out on you, though. I’m sorry.”

“It’s quite alright, Will. You said you don’t know what he wants; is that true?”

“No…I know,” Will said slowly. He saw a customer walk up and excused himself, fixing their drink before making his way back slowly, eyes on the room rather than look to where he knew he’d find an attentive, pleasant face. “I think he’s lonely. I think he…sees me, and he thinks that I could understand him the way no one else can.”

“If he’s killing people, what use does he have of someone understanding him?” Hannibal wondered.

“People can wonder and investigate, and that is exciting,” Will said, “but there’s something in knowing that when someone looks at you, they can see your mind and not be scared of what they find.”

“Do you understand what this person is trying to convey?” Hannibal took another sip of his wine, eyes caressing the light reflecting off of the glass before he looked up again.

“If it didn’t sound so ridiculous, I’d say it was a courtship. He wants to –uhm, he…in his own way, is trying to court me.” Courting. There was something silly about saying it out loud, but there they were. Hannibal didn’t laugh at his use of words, though. He set the wine glass down and considered Will seriously.

“People, when they admire someone, reach out in whatever medium they can. A person finds someone sweet, they get them chocolate. They want them to swoon, they play music that makes them feel admired and beautiful. They want to excite them, they take them on adrenaline-inducing highs. They want to treat them, they take them to dinner.”

“They want to consume them, they consume the artistic depictions of them,” Will added dryly, then stopped. He stared at Hannibal, and in the small distance between them, Hannibal stared back.

“I…I will be right back,” he said, and he went around the bar, grabbing one of the other workers to man his post as he slipped out of the back, fingers clawing for his phone.

Jack Crawford’s phone went to voicemail again. Will drummed his fingers on his leg and paced in the alley, jumping at any small sound.

“Jack, it’s Will Graham. I still wonder about why three, but he’s eating his trophies. They’re surgical trophies, right? Organs? He’s eating them. He wants to consume them, take…part of them. For the people, it’s food, it’s just eating to him, that’s why you call it sounders –he sees meat, not people. But for me, he hasn’t killed me yet because to consume me would be to take away the one person he thinks could bridge the gap between his mind and the world. It’s not a physical sustenance but a mental one, and to supply the physical would leave the mental drained, depleted.

“He’s eating them, though. He’s eating them, but I still wonder why three.”

Will leaned his head back against the brick wall, and he exhaled shakily. The Chesapeake Ripper wanted to eat him, but he didn’t know quite how.

When he returned, Hannibal was finishing his drink. His maroon eyes tracked Will’s movements, and the shift of his shoulders was lithe, graceful. At the offer of another glass, he shook his head.

“Did I say something to trouble you?” he asked.

“You wanted to treat me, so you took me to dinner,” Will said distractedly. “Beverly said you asked if I was doing alright.”

“It was my treat,” Hannibal said slowly.

“I’m not doing too well,” he confessed, taking the glass from in front of Hannibal.

“Perhaps you need another treat,” Hannibal suggested lightly. The curl of his lips sent small tingles of pleasure trailing along Will’s veins.

“I don’t want to inconvenience you,” Will said. Then, “Is it selfish that I was glad you followed me from Sangre to Hollin’s?”

“I think, given what you’re currently undergoing, to be selfish is not only a requirement, but I all but demand it of you,” Hannibal replied.

Pinot Gris

Chapter 7: Pinot Gris

Dear Will,

And when thou art weary I'll find thee a bed,
Of mosses and flowers to pillow thy head:
And there Georgiana I'll sit at thy feet,
While my story of love I enraptur'd repeat.

If I'd known, dear Will, that my behavior haunted you such that sleep evaded you, I'd have found a better way. Perhaps soon our acquaintanceship can extend past these floral words and transcend to speech. Perhaps then, you will sleep at ease knowing I am near.

Yours,

-C.R.

Will called Jack, and this time he got an answer.

"I got your voicemails; I was out of the office for a few days," he grunted.

"There's a body," Will said, fingers plucking at the coffee beans the Chesapeake Ripper had left in the envelope. Their smell betrayed them as a particular bean used at Hollin's. It seemed Hannibal hadn't been the only one invested in him that night, and the thought made his skin crawl. He tested the lock on his apartment door, fingers drumming on the frame.

"Do you have the body?"

"I have the poem."

"I'm on it."

It didn't take too long to find the body. Once Will met with Jack, it was a simple matter of scouring through the beds of flowers on campus until they found a hit. Sure enough, nestled among the flowers and moss by the water in the arboretum, a body was found. It was decidedly fresh; his insides spilled out, lilies and tulips spilled in, creating an odd river of macabre red sluicing through the cheerful pinks, yellows, and blues. Will leaned against a tree trunk while Jack barked orders into his cell phone, and he stared at a very familiar face, unable to quite piece it together.

Mr. Newsun hadn't lived long enough for Hannibal to discuss shitty bills.

“Will.” Will looked to Jack, and Jack’s grim expression was too much for him. He raked fingers through his hair, shaking his head.

“I can’t,” he said hoarsely. He couldn’t get close to him. He couldn’t.

“Do you know this man?” Jack asked.

“He was a customer at my job…he was rude to me the other night,” Will said, gesturing. His eyes burned. His eyes burned, and it seemed enough time had passed for the Chesapeake Ripper to begin his next grouping of three.

“The Chesapeake Ripper was at your place of work the other night?” Jack pressed.

“He must have been, he…he was sloppy, and he had to be escorted out. I informed a regular about having trouble sleeping, and now…” The breath hissed from him, and he slid to the ground, pressing his hands to his face.

“Will.”

“Don’t make me look,” he begged into his hands.

“I need you to see if there’s more here that you know of. This man is after you,” Jack added the last part, a hint of pushing in his tone. “You know him better than anyone else.”

First one, then two. After three minutes, Will dragged himself to his feet and walked over, careful to stay away from the wet ground close to the water. The man’s eyes were open wide, and Will once remembered hearing that the eyes reflected the last thing they saw when they died. It was a lie. If so, he’d have seen his killer, and Will would see the killer in his eyes. Instead, he saw himself, and after a hysterical breath left him, he thought maybe that was the same thing.

“He’s…sorry for making me lose sleep,” Will said raggedly. “He wants his presence to be a comfort, not a pain. He wants every aspect of my life to be trouble free, hence why this person angered him. They were disrespectful to me, therefore disrespectful to that ideal.”

“This is his representation of you as well, though; have you been disrespectful at all?” Jack asked. Will started to shake his head, then stopped.

“I’ve been…speaking with someone,” he said slowly. His heartbeat drummed in his ears.

“Who?”

“A regular…he’s a psychiatrist. He noticed my unease, and I’ve told him a bit about my…problems.” Problems. Truly, apart from the one time he’d had a close encounter, there’d been no problems for *him.* “If he saw this man causing a scene, he’d have also seen-”

“-Your regular listening to you?”

"…My regular listening to me," Will realized, and he looked at Jack. "Dr. Lecter is in trouble, Jack."

"Dr. Hannibal Lecter?" Jack sounded mystified. "He's consulted on a case for the FBI before, with Dr. Du Maurier."

Will didn't know who Dr. Du Maurier was, and he honestly didn't care. All he could think of was the kind, knowing look on Hannibal's face as he suggested they have another date, and the fact that because of Will, he was potentially in danger.

"Do you have his number?" Will asked hollowly.

"No."

"I'll find it," he said, moving away from the body.

"Will, I need you to-"

"I'll find it," he repeated. It took a few searches on google to find the right number, but once he did he pressed send, waiting. Waiting. He paced at the top of the hill, and when a familiar, accented voice answered, he spied police cars pulling up.

"Dr. Lecter's office."

"You don't have a secretary," Will said. Stupid.

"She was inclined to romantic ideals and had her heart swept away to Scotland. I can hardly fault her that," Hannibal replied, and if it was a surprise to hear Will's voice, he said nothing about it. He could have been commenting on the weather with a client.

"I think I've put you in danger, Hannibal." No sense in hesitating. No sense in light small talk while there was a killer about.

"How so?" A thread of concern filtered in through the curiosity.

"The secret admirer was at my work the other night…he got a hold of Mr. Newsun." His voice went flat.

"…I can presume that it was not pleasant."

"He knows I spoke with you, I'm…concerned he's going to try and find a way to harm you." The police officers were followed by forensics, followed by FBI agents, followed by the trademark red hair of a rather nosy woman.

"I'm at my office right now, but is there a way that I'm able to help you, Will?"

"*Help me*?" Will asked, strangled. "I call you to warn you about a killer fixating on you, and you're concerned for *me*?"

"He is stalking you, Will," Hannibal pointed out. "If you'd like, I'll be there soon."

“You live an hour away,” Will protested.

“Consider this my treat,” Hannibal said, and he hung up. Will thought about calling back to reaffirm that he was in danger, and running straight to the target was a terrible idea, but at the sight of Freddie Lounds getting closer, he walked over to Jack instead. Priorities.

“Jack.”

“I want a partition put up here, here, and here, and I-”

“*Jack*,” Will emphasized.

“-think I’m going to –what?” Jack glanced at him sharply. The police officers that were listening glanced to Will, confused at his presence.

“You’re going to want to get her out of here,” Will said, nodding towards Freddie. She loitered by some of the officers, her head turned in their direction.

“A civilian?” Jack asked.

“A reporter.”

That did the trick. At Jack’s curt barking of orders, Freddie Lounds was up and carted away before she could get a good picture, blocked back by the cars over two hundred yards from the scene.

It was a blur after that. Will was deposited to a stone bench on the other side of the water, and the letter that’d been written to him was passed through hand after hand after hand. He wasn’t sure if it was the stain of the Chesapeake Ripper on him, or if it was his own thoughts, but the casual act of the poem being handled by so many that didn’t understand the nuances disgusted him. It was a knot, coiled and putrid in his guts. The Chesapeake Ripper wanted *him* to sleep well, not the rest of those bastards. They didn’t know.

They didn’t *know*.

He felt Jack keeping an eye on him and it reassured him much the way he was sure a dog felt safe knowing their leash was two seconds from being tugged. When a familiar face made its way down the grassy hill, Will watched the approach with equal parts trepidation and longing.

If the Chesapeake Ripper sensed those kinds of feelings radiating off of him, Hannibal Lecter was in rather grave danger indeed.

“Will,” Hannibal greeted him lightly. Will thought about standing, but Hannibal sat down before he could.

“You didn’t have to drive an hour,” he said.

“And your secret admirer didn’t have to take the life of an innocent person to get your attention. Alas, here we both are.” Hannibal gestured, palms out, as if to say *what are you*

gonna do about it.

There they both were. Will looked down at his leg that was close enough to touch, a mere inch separating them from being pressed together. He wondered what it'd be like to do that, bold, empowered by the corpse that sat just twenty feet away. He looked to the corpse and it sobered him somewhat.

"He wants to speak with me. He finds the letters too flowery."

"He's getting bolder?"

"Things like this always escalate," Will said.

"How safe are you in your apartment?" Hannibal asked. "Do you have someone closeby to help you?"

"I have some friends I could stay with. If he's watching me, though…I'm not going to put them in danger. I shouldn't be putting you in danger, I…"

"The worst thing you can do is close yourself off, Will. As you said before: they want to isolate you from the people that care about you, therefore; the last thing you should do is allow him to sequester you away from your support."

"What do you suggest, then?" Will glanced to him, to his hands that sat folded neatly on his lap. His own fingers drummed out a mindless beat on his leg.

"I think a diversion," Hannibal said, reaching over to clasp his hand. His skin was warm, soft. Will allowed it, the infernal tapping ceasing as his breath caught and he stared at their hands, their skin. He shifted his leg so that it pressed against Hannibal's, and Hannibal pressed back. It was about as nice as he imagined it'd be.

They walked over to the forensics team, moving around the edge of the grotesque scene in order to speak with Jack. Hannibal's hand ghosted the small of his back, a presence but not quite a touch. Jack looked up from a clipboard of paper with photos attached, his gaze leaping between Will and Jack.

"Have you had the chance to meet Dr. Lecter, Agent Crawford?" Jack paused in what he was about to say, then shook Hannibal's hand.

"I know you did some amazing work on a psychological profile with Dr. Du Maurier. That was a good catch you did on the Minnesota Shrike."

"We were happy to help in dire circumstances like that. All those girls…" Hannibal's voice trailed off, and his eyes flickered towards the corpse. They were beginning the process of removing it to take it for closer inspection in a lab, a small gurney unfolding beside it. At the close-up sight of the body, his eyes darkened.

"I wasn't aware you came down here –isn't your office in Baltimore?"

“I have a client that I see here specifically due to their inability to travel for long periods of time,” Hannibal explained.

“Well, I’m sure Will has filled you in. Would you like to take a look, doctor?” Hannibal hesitated, his mouth twisted into a mild grimace.

“I was actually going to ask you to excuse Will, if at all possible. This isn’t good for him, and I am going to try and help with the shock.”

Crawford didn’t like that. He looked from Will to Hannibal, then back to Will, his words slurring about in his mouth before he seemed to find a good way to say them.

“I have a couple more questions before you go, Will,” he said at last. “You said he was eating them.”

“What did he take from this one?” Will asked, looking back down. The intestines spilling from him seemed to be in whole order, no one piece missing.

“The brain.”

“He either ate it already, or he’s going to,” Will said, stomach churning.

“How did you realize he was eating them?” Jack pressed. “You sounded excited on the phone.”

“…I just talked it out.” Will shifted, tucking his hands into his pockets. “It’s his way of consuming me without having to risk actually consuming me.” If that did or did not make sense to Jack Crawford, it didn’t show on his face. His jaw worked for several moments before he looked to the body, heaving a low sigh.

“We looked at campus footage of your day to day travel, but there are at least forty people that are in several shots of you. None of them seem fixated or especially keen on following you around. There’s nothing to go on there.”

“I wonder why three,” Will said, ignoring the sting of a lost lead. He’d hoped that they’d have seen a part where one called out, where one was especially invested in him.

“I know.”

“If there’s nothing else, Agent Crawford, I do insist on removing Will from this scene,” Hannibal pressed, and Jack nodded. Several expressions crossed his face in a moment, and Will wondered if he was searching for an excuse to make Will stay, or if he was just annoyed that it wasn’t his decision for him to leave.

“Keep in touch,” he said to Will. “I know we will.”

Hannibal led him to his car, parked several spaces away from the cops, and he drove, not mentioning where they were going. Will leaned his head back into the headrest and decided that he really didn’t care.

He first took him to lunch, an upscale, ritzy restaurant whose servers all but bowed to take their order. Will didn't know half of the Italian words on the page, so Hannibal ordered for him, requesting a bottle of Pinot Gris to go with the food. Will thumbed at the multiple forks and spoons beside his dish, blinking away the image of a river of flowers leading up the corpse's rib cage. It was a nice touch; really stark against the ribs and the red.

"What do you imagine this secret admirer to look like?" Hannibal asked. Will had felt his intent gaze on the top of his head for a few minutes, but he'd let the silence hold.

"Knee-jerk reaction is that he's putrid, pockmarked, an…ugly thing that was supposed to have died in the hospital but somehow survived to become this," Will said slowly. He frowned down at his silverware. "Reality taught me that he's probably charming, affable, and has no problems with dating or maintaining connections. They're just not the connections he wants."

"You think he's eating them?"

"He is." Will chanced a look to his face, but Hannibal's gaze was as mysterious to him as ever, unflinching and unjudging.

"How did you come to that conclusion?" Hannibal asked curiously.

"You said when you wanted to treat someone, you made them food. His appetites aren't so simple. He doesn't want to treat someone, he doesn't think it's sweet. His fascination makes him want to consume every aspect, to take them into himself so he can see every crevice and hollow place. He wants to fill those places with nothing but him."

"Then why hasn't he eaten you?" Hannibal crossed one leg over the other, and when the server returned, he watched the man pour their glasses with finesse. Will waited for their audience to leave before speaking again.

"If he is interested in what my mind can see, he knows to kill me is the end-all. If he's really…craving that connection, then he'll try and prolong this. When I die, it'll be a complete accident on his part. He'll be sorry, until he's not sorry anymore."

"When you die, Will?"

"These things escalate, Hannibal." Will studied Hannibal's long, tapered fingers as they slid along the neck of the glass. He wondered what they'd feel like on his bare skin. In comparison, he wondered what the Chesapeake Ripper's hands would feel like on his bare skin, seeing as how he already knew what they felt like when he was clothed. He suppressed a shudder.

"You think that when he finally manages a face-to-face meeting, he'll lose control of himself."

"Yes."

“And you don’t think the FBI will catch him before that?” Hannibal lifted the glass, leaning in to smell the rich scents of the bouquet. Will took a large gulp, ignoring the bouquet entirely.

“They’ve been trying to catch the Chesapeake Ripper for years, long before me. If they didn’t then, I don’t see how they’ll find him now.”

“I find myself personally invested in your well-being.” He took a sip of the wine, closing his eyes to savor it. When he opened them, he pinned Will to his place on the chair. “I’d rather you not die at the hands of the Ripper.”

“I’d rather you didn’t, either,” Will said, leaning in.

“Why would he give consequence to me?” Hannibal inquired.

“Because he knows that I-” He stopped himself from saying too much, from speaking words he wouldn’t be able to retract. Hannibal’s eyes traced his face, and Will remembered his last day at Belle Bleu, how he’d felt naked, exposed under the light, unassuming conversation. Wanting Hannibal made him feel stripped down to the bare bones.

“-that you are interested in a person you don’t entirely know, for reasons you can’t fathom,” Hannibal finished for him. At Will’s slow, uncertain nod, he smiled. “It must anger him that I can accomplish the very thing he’s trying and failing at.”

“You don’t sound very scared,” Will pointed out.

“In my line of work, it’s not all depression and mid-life crisis. I’ve dealt with my fair share of monsters, too.”

He took him home after lunch, and once again Will stood on the sidewalk and found it in himself to look up to his eyes, studying his face intently. Hannibal’s hands were clasped behind his back, and he stared back.

“That’s three times today,” Hannibal informed him.

“What?”

“You’ve made eye contact with me three times. Despite what’s happened, today has been a mildly pleasant day for you.” Will wasn’t going to contradict that. He smiled slightly, a crooked, grimacing thing, but a smile none-the-less.

“I still don’t know what this is,” he said.

“You know my thoughts on labels,” Hannibal reminded him. “It is whatever you want it to be.”

“Can I get back to you on that? On a day someone else didn’t…” he didn’t want to finish the words. *On a day someone else didn’t kill someone for me.*

“I have all the time in the world,” Hannibal said gravely. He moved in close, and be it the close proximity or the fact that Will regretted not leaning back the last time he had a chance, but he found himself stepping closer, too.

It was the briefest of moments, the slightest of pressure. Be it his nightmares where his admirer climbed on top of him and smothered him with desperate, invasive kisses that left him gasping for help, but he almost imagined it’d taste like blood and pennies. It didn’t. With his hands still clasped behind his back, it was the picture of innocence, of utmost respect and propriety. He pulled away, and Will couldn’t meet his eyes, this time out of a heady sense of delight rather than discomfort.

“Until next time, Will,” he said, and Will waited until he pulled away before he headed to his apartment, fingers dragging along his lips, desperate to catch just one more moment.

-

He woke to the sound of someone in his apartment.

He wasn’t sure *how* he knew upon waking that he wasn’t alone. Knowledge like that was impossible to grasp when one first wakes, the tendrils of sleep clouding the mind and distorting reality. Had he heard a noise? A scrape of a chair leg on linoleum? There was nothing. In the silence of the darkest part of the night, Will lay in bed with his heart struggling to find a steady staccato, the vibrant dreams of his admirer smothering him still fresh and bloody in his mind’s eye.

He was just starting to drift off again when he heard it –the gentle, creaking step of a foot finding a wretched spot in his living room.

Then he was up, scrambling for his door. He wasn’t sure if he made noise, or if the intruder seemed to sense his fear, but their footsteps quickened to the hall, to his bedroom. Will lunged, cursed, and slammed the door to his bedroom shut, locking it. He pressed his forehead to the door, his breath a balloon in his chest just threatening to pop. The person paused, just on the other side, and he let out a quiet, desperate whine when the doorknob rattled.

“It’s locked,” he called out hoarsely. He pressed himself to the door, as though he alone could hold it back if the lock broke. He sounded braver than he felt. “You should just leave, I’m…calling the cops.”

He heard no retreating footsteps, merely the creak of weight shifting from floorboard to floorboard. It felt, curious, amused. Mocking. When he was certain the man wouldn’t break the door down, Will turned on his lamp to better see his phone, then had the jolting feeling of his world crashing around him when he realized an ugly, awful truth.

His phone was charging in the front room.

Merlot

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 8: Merlot

Breath hissed from his lips as his heart all but ripped itself from his chest. The sound of the doorknob rattling behind him spurred him to action, and he leapt back across his bed to slam his back into the door, a tremor working its way along his spine. His phone wasn't in his room. He didn't have a landline. Like a complete, utter, *idiot*, he'd left it in the living room rather than have it by his bed where the light would keep him awake instead of aiding him in drifting off as he mindlessly scrolled through apps. He'd have to write a paper about the woes of such responsibility, of adulthood at its worst, when attempts at accountability were dashed by the fact that he was, most certainly, trapped. No, no, not just trapped, but confined in the worst way possible.

He'd been cornered in his bedroom by the Chesapeake Ripper.

The reality settled in, made his veins turn to ice, and he let out a quiet, muted sob, sliding down the door to sit on the ground, back pressed to the weakest spot of the door. The Chesapeake Ripper had killed people far larger than him. Mr. Newsun alone had to have weighed double Will's weight, and he'd dragged him about until he placed him in a particularly pleasant spot in the arboretum. If the Ripper got into his room, how easy would it be for him to have his way? To toss him around like a ragdoll until he was fatigued by the inanity of it?

He thought about calling out, attempting to fake his confidence again, but that was stupid. Why bait him? If he'd been in his house long enough, he'd have seen Will's phone, known him to be alone and without ability to call for help. Will rubbed his face roughly, fingernails scraping over the soft part of his eyelids, and he thought that out of all the days to die, it'd be the one where he'd finally gotten somewhere with Hannibal.

"Is that why you're here?" he realized, leaning his head back to press against the door. "You're upset about Hannibal?"

No response. Will let out a hysterical laugh, and he tapped his fingers on the ground, drumming them. It was at that moment, though, that a slip of paper slid underneath the door, stopped by his incessant tapping. Will snatched the paper up, breath caught in his throat. This wasn't happening. This wasn't happening.

Are you afraid of me, Will?

"That depends," he said shakily. "Are you here to do to me what you've been doing to everyone else?"

He slid the paper back under, watching the Ripper drag it the rest of the way. There was no sound of breathing, of throat clearing or general human existence. Just the creak of the Chesapeake Ripper settling into whatever stance he'd taken on the other side of the door, the sound of a pen gliding over paper. He slid it back, and Will stared down at it.

No. I just want to talk to you.

"Normally, when people want to talk, they walk up and strike a conversation; they don't break into someone's apartment while they're asleep," he said, and the paper disappeared. Was this really happening? The crap carpet digging into his rear and thighs said yes, but the surrealism of a serial killer sitting just outside of his door put everything to question.

That's not entirely true, though, is it? You may not have active barriers in your mind to protect you from your intrusive thoughts, but you create plenty of them between you and other people.

Will stared down at the note, the curling, elegant script. He swallowed convulsively and touched his finger to the ink, smudging it. "I do."

Therefore, in order to get your attention, one must find creative means of attaining it. For me, that means taking on an artistic license for my normal, day-to-day work.

"The way you killed people before was already artistic," Will said. He was unsure as to whether or not he was goading him or attempting to flatter him. Either way, the paper disappeared.

You realized that I consumed them, much the way I wish to consume you.

"Yes," Will whispered. He closed his eyes tightly, stomping down the whimper that dragged its way up his throat. He'd been followed to the alley when he called Jack.

I don't want to eat you though, Will. To consume is not just to physically ingest, although you would think otherwise. I want to understand you, much the way I want you to understand me.

"A consuming of the mind, then. Either way, I'm your intended victim."

Do you feel like a victim? Or are you empowered that someone would go to such great lengths to attain your attention, even for a short while.

Will laughed, a short spurt of hysteria that faded as he pressed his hands to his face and forced himself to breathe. "For a short while? You're haunting my *dreams*, Chesapeake Ripper. I can't sleep without you breathing down my neck, dogging my steps, making me nervous just to leave my apartment."

Then I'm in your thoughts just as much as you are in mine.

"No, no. One of us is only in the other's mind because the other one got it in their head that they had to murder people to get me to see them. I was fine, before, just *fine*."

The next response took some time, and Will wondered if he'd grown bored. The longer the silence crept, draining the seconds, the stiffer he became, waiting for the axe to cut through the door so that the Chesapeake Ripper could end him once and for all. When the paper slid back, he almost let out a whimper of relief.

Do you truly believe that you were fine, Will? Can you honestly tell me that you were alright with the haze of people passing by you, not quite seeing you? Unable to connect, unable to look at people without seeing their darkness reflected in you, and you wonder whether or not the darkness was truly them or if it was you all along. Your eyes that cannot quite maintain a stare for long, your hands that tap and drum to release the tension, your lips that mimic speech and inflection; were you truly alright to live your live as a husk of what your real potential could be?

"And just what is it…that you think my real potential could be?" Will asked gravely.

Tell me you were flattered that out of everyone in this city, I saw you.

"I wasn't," Will stated. The response was just as quick.

Liar.

"Alright…I will admit that I was…surprised. Flattered." Will murmured, and it scalded on the way out. What was he doing? What was he *doing*?

Are you not still?

"I'm struggling to understand your end game. You claim you aren't going to kill me, and I want to believe that. I…I *need* to believe that." He let out a choking breath, and when the paper began to slide back under the door, he put his hand on it to stop it. "You offered me your hand, Persephone to the underworld, tricked by a handful of seeds."

He let the paper go, and after a breath it slid under the door to the other side.

There are some scholars that argue it was not a trick. Persephone willingly took his hand, knowing the full ramifications of what she was doing.

"Is that what you want from me? You want me to willingly take your hand, knowing the full ramifications of what I'm doing when I take that step?"

Yes.

"I don't know if I can do that," he whispered, and he closed his eyes. "You're hurting people, and I…I see every single one behind my eyelids. I close my eyes, and I see them. Does your admiration only extend if I give in full? Does it cease if I can't condone what you do in my name?"

I don't ask for you to condone my actions, only to understand them and refuse to stand in my way when I make such choices in the future.

"Choices…shit," Will hissed. He laid his forehead to his knees, drumming his fingers on the paper. "You know what that'd label you if someone found you? You choosing, knowing full well what you choose?"

An intelligent psychopath, yes. I've read the journals and books on them. Is that what you'd call me?

"I don't know what to call you," said Will, lifting his head. "I don't think, after talking with you, they'd know what to call you, either."

Jack Crawford would know what to call me. Monster. Animal. His best catch yet. His Starry Night, his masterpiece that he could ride on for the rest of his life and rest easy knowing that if he didn't catch another one of me again at least he'd have me.

"Do you know him from before?"

Yes.

"That must be why he's willing to bring a college kid to a crime scene," Will muttered.

That, and he now has a direct link to me through you. He won't give that up, even if he has to break you to get to me.

"Do you think he's going to try and break me?" Will asked skeptically. "Or is that only through your bias that you come to that conclusion."

He once sent an FBI trainee to hunt me down. The ninth victim, the body never found. He lives with that regret, but that won't stop him from repeating the mistake. He just had to look a few years younger to find his next piece of bait.

"Why three?" Will blurted out. He tapped his fingers on the paper, on the 'ninth'. "Why three?" The paper slid back to the other side, and there was a quiet huff, a distinct sound of a muffled laugh.

Why not?

"Why not," Will said out loud. He nodded. It wasn't what he'd expected, but the longer he looked at it, suddenly he realized that yes it was. He definitely expected that from the Chesapeake Ripper.

Did that give you the insight you'd been hoping for, dear Will?

"Am I giving you insight?" Will asked in return. "This door between us, this…space. Do you see me, even through this?"

I would see you even the darkest of nights, the blackest pitch. There is no place you could go that I would not follow.

"Then…where does this leave us now? Here, in this barricade…this one-sided conversation and silence." He rolled his head side to side, popped his neck and leaned back against the door, sliding his legs out before him. The carpet itched against his skin, but he didn't dare move.

The reply took a while, and Will wondered if it'd be another paragraph splicing him to his core to see the guts inside. He was surprised at the short response back, and it occurred to him that although this wasn't the first time the Chesapeake Ripper had killed, it was the first time he'd tried his hand at romance while doing it.

In this moment, dear Will, in this here and now, I am more than content to think of you with a stab of hunger and find nourishment through the simple feeling of our heartbeats against this mere door that separates us.

Will didn't speak after that. He dragged his fingers over the elegant, beautiful script, letting the ink stain his fingertips. He wanted to remember that this was real in the morning, but he couldn't quite bring himself to snatch the paper up, a keepsake to give to Jack later when it was safe to leave his room. He didn't want it tainted like that, the way they'd tainted his letter about dreaming. Instead, he straightened his shoulders and pushed back against the door, his heartbeat steadily thumping into the wood. The door groaned, and the Chesapeake Ripper pushed back. He imagined he could feel his heartbeat, something steady and calm despite the situation, and it was to that steady pulse that he fell asleep.

When he woke in a sprawled position on the floor, the paper was still there. Will groaned, stretched, popped his neck, and looked to the final note at the bottom, one that'd been left while he dreamed of seven seeds and hands that reached willingly.

May my presence have granted you some small measure of pleasant dreams and rest.

Yours,

-C.R.

The back of his neck prickled as he realized that his dreams, in fact, had been not only been pleasant, but despite his odd sleeping position, he felt remarkably fine.

-

"Don't be mad," Alana said a week later. Will looked up from his dour sandwich and studied her warily.

"Why would I be mad?" His stomach clenched at the expression on her face.

"You know Freddie Lounds, right?" Margo drawled from her lax position on the blanket. They were sprawled on the lawn of the main campus grounds, working on homework and sharing their abysmal lunches. Margo was the only one present with no homework and no abysmal lunch, armed instead with a travel bottle of merlot that she sipped

out of a neon green straw. How she managed to get away with drinking in a public space like campus was far beyond Will, but then again, much of the Verger family was far beyond Will. Why she even attended school when it wasn't necessary was far beyond him –her brother's donations to the place had ensured an entire lecture hall had been built in their name.

"I know Freddie."

"She's got an article out on you. Says the Chesapeake Ripper is in *love*," Margo said from around the straw.

Will looked down to his sandwich and fiddled with it, stuffing a bit of cheese back in on the side.

"Will-"

"Can I see it?" he asked. Beverly, headphones in and pencil dancing across the page, didn't notice him reach across her textbook to hold his hand out for Alana's tablet.

"I don't think you want to see it," Alana said, holding her tablet away from him.

"I do," Will persisted, flipping his hand impatiently. Beverly looked up from her book, nudged his hand away from a particular paragraph she needed to read, and leaned in, squinting at it intently.

"It's not…it's tasteless. I believe you'd use the term tasteless." She relinquished her tablet, though, much to Margo's delight.

"Chesapeake Ripper Sends Love Sonnets to Local Student: It Takes One to Catch One"

For the past month, George Washington University has been plagued by a series of killings, each one more heinous than the last. Believed to be the work of The Chesapeake Ripper, our campus has been rife with an underlying fear that any one of us could be the next victim in his horrendous crimes.

How awful do you feel, readers, to know that with the dedicated work done by myself, I was able to find out that the reason our beloved university is under attack is due to the Chesapeake Ripper finding himself smitten with one of our own? Fourth year student, Will Graham, not only has been receiving letters of interest from the detestable Chesapeake Ripper, but until the FBI got wind of it, he was more than happy to keep quiet on the matter.

The latest death, not one of our own but found on our beloved soil of the arboretum, was found by none other than Will Graham and FBI Agent Jack Crawford, using clues from the latest love letter to find the body that surely followed. When asked if he had any concerns about using a university student to catch the killer, Agent Crawford forcefully removed me from the premises.

Can we trust Will Graham to uphold the law of our land, though? Why has he kept silent about this matter for so long, as one-by-one we are lain waste by the bloodstained hands of the serial killer that baffles the FBI even today? We can't forget his last killing spree with

nine victims, one of which the body was never accounted for. Perhaps, it is possible that Will Graham holds an affinity for the murderer, and wishes to stand by meekly while he plies his trade? Or maybe he is waiting for his own chance to become part of the FBI's 'Most Wanted'.

"She's a bitch," Zeller said, reading the article over Will's shoulder. He took a ferocious bite of a crumbly granola bar and plopped down beside him, tossing his book bag to the side. Margo kicked it off of her foot and took a long sip of her wine, eyes fastened to Will's face.

"She's mad at me because I outed her to Agent Crawford about being a reporter," Will said, handing the tablet back. Hornets crawled under his skin, biting, buzzing. He wanted to punch something, to maim something. He looked down at the morose photo of him, huddled by the corpse, and he shoved the tablet to Alana.

"Is it true that the Chesapeake Ripper is sending you letters?" Alana asked, taking the tablet away from him. Will nodded.

"That's fucked," Zeller commented.

"That's why the FBI wanted all of the CCTV tapes…one of these girls in class works security part time, and she said they took all of the tapes to look over. They must have been looking for your beau," Margo said, casting him a sly glance.

"He's not my beau," Will snapped.

"Yeah, and we didn't hook up at Sarah's party freshman year," Margo retorted.

"Margo." Alana shot her a warning glance. "Will…why didn't you tell us this was happening?"

"It's fine," he said, and at Alana's exasperated expression, he added, "it's *fine*. The FBI has it under control."

"Is four bodies and a renegade reporter really fine, though?" Margo wondered.

"You could have come to us, and we'd have-"

"Done what?" Will asked sharply, looking at her. Alana sometimes tried to be his mother, his friend, and his sister in all the same breath. Her expression shifted, a mild hurt, and he looked to his things, chagrined. "I forgot."

"You forgot."

"I was busy with work, and I forgot. Then when I remembered, there was a lot going on. But it's *fine*."

It was fine, if fine was the Chesapeake Ripper visiting him in his home, pressing heartbeat to heartbeat to a bedroom door to soothe him to sleep. If fine was the way his dreams melded to blurred moments when the barriers between them would fall, when Will would wake up and decide that maybe it truly did make perfect sense for the world to burn. If

fine was the way he wondered just what the face of the Chesapeake Ripper looked like, and if he'd think it was a nice face indeed.

"How can we help?" Alana asked.

"Don't," Will replied, standing up. He needed to walk, he needed…something. Hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"Will-"

"I'll see you later," he said, scooping his back pack up.

"I don't-"

"*Later*," he emphasized, walking away. He ignored Beverly's probing stare as he maneuvered around her, and it wasn't until he was on his bike and heading towards home that he realized the buzzing sound of her music had stopped long before the conversation had.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for being so patient with a cliffhanger like that! I would say 'all is well' but...I mean, can we really say that all is well?

Your comments and kudos have literally fueled me more than two protein bars and an energy drink on a hike, just so you know. You guys are literally the most amazing things that have ever happened! :)

Riesling

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 9: Riesling

Naturally, Hollin's had to let him go.

"Our customers are terrified," the manager said woefully. "They're worried being served by you will…well. You understand, don't you?"

Will understood. Painfully.

"It's fine," he said, his smile a grimace.

"Put us down for a reference, and I'll make sure you get a job for certain, Will. With our clientele, though…we can't be too careful. A reference I can certainly give, though. I can do that."

That made three of them.

Hannibal wasn't there to watch him collect his things, nor did he bump into him on the way out. Back in the alley, he unlocked his bike and wheeled it onto the sidewalk, and it seemed that the heavens themselves were out to punish him as they let out a thunderous crack and split wide open, a downpour so abysmal that it drenched him within seconds. Will thought about being upset by it, but he decided that it was fitting. Everyone was in the mood to dump on him.

He wheeled his bike the long way home, a morbid sort of punishment he took in stride.

-

The letter waited patiently at his door when he reached the apartment. Will paused, considered pressing his sodden foot to the thing, then reconsidered. He scooped it up gingerly, and he went inside, locking the door behind him. The other letters had been taken away by Jack for study, as well as the flowers, seeds, and gravel. He lamented their lack of space occupying the center of his table, and he slumped into his chair, dripping dismally onto the floor.

Dear Will,

The first three hours of night were almost spent

The time that every star shines down on us

When Love appeared to me so suddenly

That I still shudder at the memory.

Joyous Love seemed to me, the while he held

My heart within his hands, and in his arms

My lady lay asleep wrapped in a veil.

He woke her then and trembling and obedient

She ate that burning heart out of his hand;

Weeping I saw him then depart from me.

Would you eat my burning heart? Would you take the seven seeds that I offer freely? Would you be brave enough to peek behind the veil? I lie awake, and I wonder.

Yours,

-C.R.

He turned the envelope on its side, and petals of jasmine fell into his palm. They were still damp and smelled of rain, and he wondered if the Chesapeake Ripper had also walked without an umbrella.

A call on his cell distracted him from calling Jack; with a poem, there was surely a body. Was it four now, or five? How many until they were rounded out to another sounder of three? What did that say about him that he couldn't recall just how many bodies the Ripper was piling up just outside of his door?

Why three?

Why not?

“Hello?” He answered the phone distractedly, brushing one of the petals along his bottom lip. The Chesapeake Ripper mentioned dreams; jasmine in dreams foretold good luck and romance.

“Will,” Hannibal said, and his voice pulled him from his thoughts muddled by the dipping and swaying of words that cut to the quick. He dropped the jasmine petal, somehow guilty.

“I didn’t realize you had my number,” he said, which wasn’t what he wanted to say at all.

“I saved it when you called my office,” Hannibal explained. He didn’t sound defensive.

“I was let go,” Will informed him, answering a question he was sure would be asked. Hannibal sighed quietly, and it was the sort of sigh that spoke volumes more than anything he could ever say.

“Not enough eye contact?”

“Not enough assurance that my admirer won’t harm another customer of theirs,” said Will, pushing the letter away.

“If one measured luck, I would say you don’t seem to be in possession of much of it,” Hannibal said kindly.

“Was it the dead bodies or the steadily growing resume that clued you in?” Will dug his fingernails into the grooves of the table, a savage, unpleasant smile on his lips.

“Are you in need of another distraction?”

“Are you looking to up your bounty?” Will retorted.

“Fear makes you rude,” Hannibal noted, and Will slumped into his chair, guilty but unable to quite pry the snark from off of his tongue. Fear did make him rude because it was either fight, flight, or freeze, and fleeing made predators give chase while freezing gave them the perfect angle for his throat. All he’d ever known in his life was how to fight.

“What did you have in mind?” Will asked after a moment.

“I have finished with my client in DC, and I find myself hungry. Allow me to cook dinner for you?”

Will hadn’t managed to dry off by the time Hannibal arrived with bags of groceries, and it was apparent in the firm set of his lips that he wasn’t pleased with it. Unlike Will, he’d had an umbrella. When Will opened the door, clothes sopping and water still dripping from his limp curls, he stepped into the small entryway and observed the lack of light with a peculiar expression in his eyes.

“You are having a difficult day,” he decided and he led Will to the table, easing him back onto his chair. Will watched as Hannibal looked about, spied the hall and headed down it, pausing to open several doors before he found the correct one and returned with a towel. He dropped the towel onto Will’s hair and rubbed it in gently, thumbs pressing and rotating against his skull with the skill of a masseuse.

“You should change,” he said, sliding the towel around his shoulders. “You don’t want to catch a cold.”

Will nodded and headed to the bedroom, pausing at the door to stare at the small pen mark near the knob, as though the Chesapeake Ripper had marked the space where he’d debated kicking it in. Will stopped and stared at it every time he went to his room.

When he returned, dry and prickly, Hannibal had found the light switch and was well underway, chopping onions and laying them out alongside a long stretch of meat on the

cutting board. Will observed him in the small kitchenette before he sat down again, eyes drifting from Hannibal's capable hands to the letter on the table.

"Did you read it?" he asked.

"I admit that I was curious to see what he'd have to say." Hannibal glanced up at him and smiled briefly.

"What do you think? Being a psychiatrist."

Hannibal mulled it over as he worked, leaving Will to slide all of the jasmine petals together into a small, chaotic pile. He pressed one down with his thumb and crushed it, then instantly regretted it.

"He's not shy," Hannibal decided. "His reasons for reclusive behavior and remaining aloof are purely by choice, not necessity."

"He's not shy," Will agreed. The definition of shy wasn't lurking in someone's house and passing notes underneath their doorway. He could have spoken, but he chose a medium in which Will had to pay particular attention with more than one sense attuned. That was many things, but it wasn't shy. Manipulative. A bit narcissistic, if he was being honest.

A little romantic, if he was being *too* honest with himself.

"He is a romantic. He is a fan of the classics –did you see that was Dante's first sonnet, *La Vita Nuova*?"

Will nodded, still trying to fix the petal he'd broken.

"They've all been classics," he said, and at the hiss of spiced meat, he pulled his gaze away to watch Hannibal work, making use of the too small kitchenette with a poise Will hadn't expected. There wasn't enough room there for him to help, but more than enough room to watch.

"Does that mean there is a body?"

"Not every letter is a body," Will said evasively. Not every letter, but so far every poem. He should call Jack. He reasoned Jack would call him when he found it.

"And even so, you have no business seeing it. Agent Crawford taking you directly to a crime scene was mildly off-putting, in my opinion. Either he sought genuine insight, or he wished to gauge your reaction by placing you in such a shocking position that he'd see whether or not you already knew of it." He tossed something in the pan, and it screamed.

"You think Jack Crawford believes I'm behind this?"

"From what I know of him, he is a suspicious man, prone to bullying his way through things if reason can't stand."

“He told me that he genuinely wanted insight because of…” He didn’t feel like saying it anymore. He was tired of everyone talking about it.

“Your way of thinking?” Hannibal glanced over to him, a note of sympathy in his voice.

“…Yeah.”

Hannibal didn’t push for more, and Will was glad. He was tired, strung out and far too limp to bother with anything more than watching Hannibal create something of rich decadence and smell. He laid out a bold red beef curry on two only mildly chipped plates, and somehow it made them look less shabby with the presentation.

“This is by far the nicest thing I’ve seen in this house,” said Will, turning the plate around to inspect it.

“Mostly microwave pizzas, I’d imagine?”

“Oven bake pizzas, thank you.” He watched Hannibal pour the wine, studying the color of it.

“You shouldn’t eat so much processed food,” Hannibal chastised lightly, like he was commenting on the weather.

“It’d probably make it hard to outrun a killer if the grease in my arteries decided to kill me,” Will agreed. He smiled, but it was more than a little self-deprecating, more than a little savage.

Hannibal looked like he had a profound thought at a statement like that, but whatever it was, he held it in. Instead, he set the wine bottle down and adjusted his fork by his plate, a clever smile on his lips.

“Not everyone pairs a Riesling with red beef curry, but I like to live somewhat dangerously,” Hannibal said, presenting the glass to him. Unlike the restaurants and bars, it was one of Will’s stemless glasses, something Beverly had reasoned would be perfect for nights when he was too drunk to be delicate. “This particular brand does nothing but heighten the taste.”

“I could live with your sort of danger,” Will replied. He took a sip of the wine and nodded in affirmation to his statement.

“It doesn’t quite capture the full aroma in that sort of glass, but it is the taste I was looking for.” Hannibal watched him and seemed to be content to make sure Will ate most of his meal before he spoke again. “Have you given it any thought?”

He knew what Hannibal meant without having to ask.

“I like no labels,” he said after he swallowed his food. He wanted to savor it, but his stomach was a vacuum, and in the back of his head there was the faint whisper of his

forgetting to eat all day. “Out of everything going on right now, it’s the one thing I don’t feel pressure for.”

“Nor should you.” Hannibal took a bite of his food.

“Fear makes me rude,” Will agreed with his earlier sentiment. Hannibal smiled a little, a crafty sort of thing.

“Fear for you, or fear for me?”

“A bit of both. I don’t want to pull you into anything.” He finished his plate and stared down at it, then to the side where the jasmine petals were piled. He was startled at the touch of Hannibal reaching out to grasp his hand, and he held it tightly.

“You can’t pull someone if they’re already wading in willingly.”

They tried to watch the news, but at the first mention of the Chesapeake Ripper, Hannibal changed the channel. They watched a quarter of a cheesy lifetime movie before Will found himself laughing, then Hannibal started laughing, and somewhere in between him catching Will’s eye and Will letting their legs press together side by side, he found himself on his back with Hannibal sliding on top of him.

“No labels,” Will said, and it sounded much firmer in his head, less breathy and wanting. Hannibal smiled lightly, and his hands slid along Will’s sides, each inch carving a delicious path of heat that made his heart pound in longing. He wanted to touch. God, he wanted to touch.

“No labels,” Hannibal agreed, and he dipped his head down, breath warm and tingly on his skin. His nose traced along Will’s collarbone over the ratty white tee, and he paused with his lips pressed to the hollow of his neck. Will shivered when he inhaled deeply, as if Hannibal was committing his scent to memory. He kissed his way along the column of his throat, paused at the curve of his bottom lip, and his smile was just devilish enough to make Will groan in anticipation.

His kisses were enough to get drunk on. The taste of Riesling was on his lips, the scent of his cologne was arousing, and Will’s arms were tight around him before he knew what he was doing, before he could pause to listen to the voice in his head that said the Chesapeake Ripper would surely kill them if he knew.

He told that voice to kindly shut the hell up. He was going to let someone else take control for a little while.

-

The pounding on the door of his apartment woke Will at 7:00 A.M. the next morning. He sat up in a daze, sliding the warm, wiry arm out from around his hip with more than a little reluctance, a yawn punctuating his half-attempt at a muttered curse. Beside him, Hannibal turned his head and shifted, stirring but not waking.

It was Jack.

"I've been calling your phone," Jack said, walking in. He cast a predatory gaze around the front room, searching, assessing. At the sight of two plates and two wine glasses, he arched a brow and turned to survey Will critically. "You have a guest last night, Will?"

"Not really your business," Will hedged, shifting from one foot to the other. He had the sudden urge to put on pants over his boxers.

"It is when I've got a body and I can't get a hold of you," Jack said, dangerously quiet. "Where's your phone? Didn't I tell you I'd be in touch?"

"I left it out here," Will said, and he shambled over to it, peeking down at it. Sure enough, multiple missed calls the day before, as well as a couple earlier that morning. He scratched his side, mildly uncomfortable. He really should keep it in his room, since the last time he'd kept it out in the front room the Chesapeake Ripper saw fit to waltz into his house like he owned it.

He'd been a little distracted though, what with elegant way Hannibal had in removing articles of clothing and tossing them about. Very distracted, in truth.

"Is that a note?" Jack asked, stalking over to it as Will cleared the notifications. He snatched it up without waiting for a response, casting quick, furious glances along the lines. "You got another note and didn't call me?"

"I was drunk," Will lied. Somehow, he didn't feel guilty about it.

"Drunk."

"I had a guest last night, and I was drunk."

"Who did you have over last night, Will?" At that, Will faltered, and something on his face made Jack's stance shift, his weight moving to his other foot as he placed his hands on his hips. Something whispered in Will's ear that it was not the sort of stance he wanted to be in front of.

"I think you ought to tell me," Jack said, dangerously quiet.

"There should be some aspects of Will's life that are private, don't you think, Agent Crawford?" At the sound of Hannibal's voice, husky from sleep, Will felt his face heat up, spreading from his ears all the way down to his neck. He glanced back at Hannibal in the hallway, clad in an unbuttoned shirt and loose, unbuckled slacks, then to Jack whose face showed that out of all of the things he'd expected, *that* was not one of them.

"Dr. Lecter, I…"

"I know this may seem untoward, but no one here would dare ask about your intimate affairs. I think he should expect the same courtesy."

If there was one thing Will Graham wished for in that moment, it was that he'd been smart enough to lift his phone up to capture a photo of the utmost embarrassment on Agent Jack Crawford's face. As it was, he too was embarrassed, and he shifted from one foot to the other, crossing his arms over his chest.

"There's a body?" he prompted, trying to redirect.

"…Yeah. Yeah, there's a body." Jack's eyes leapt from Hannibal to Will, and he let out a short breath of surprise, running his fingers through his short, cropped hair. A remnant of when it was longer. "We've already got it at the lab, and I need you down there."

"…I need to shower," Will said when Jack made no move to leave. He motioned back towards the hallway, back to Hannibal and the scattered clothes that, if Jack looked hard enough, would definitely see strewn about recklessly.

"You know where it is," Jack said, and he waved the note towards Will before turning and walking out of the apartment, the door slamming shut behind him.

"Fuck," Will said decidedly, turning to lean against the back of the couch. He buried his face in his hands and let out a short, miserable laugh, the kind that sunk down deep and left you feeling sick after.

"He suspected you of being in bed with a killer," Hannibal said pleasantly, walking over. Will rubbed his eyes, and between the kaleidoscope of colors exploding in his vision from the pressure and his fingers, he eyed the stretch of skin that led down towards Hannibal's naval. He'd purposefully not belted or adjusted the slacks, allowing the full effect of his half-nude presence to say what his words couldn't. The impulse to tug them down further almost overcame him.

"I know."

"I'm somewhat appalled at his suspicion. It almost seemed like he supposed you couldn't attract anyone else to entertain for an evening." His small, playful smile belied the claim at offense as he walked over and stood in front of Will, nudging a thigh between his legs so that he could scoot closer. Will let him, hands lowering as he glanced from his mouth, full from rather abrasive bites, then back down to his naval where there was just the barest hints of a bruise the size of grasping fingertips.

"Was it very entertaining?" Will asked. He glanced up at Hannibal's face again, a whisper of the night before made apparent by the mussed hair and faint suck mark just behind his ear.

"Very. I rather enjoyed the encore, too." His hands slid underneath Will's shirt, cold fingertips making his muscles twitch. "If you require assistance in the shower, I'm sure I'd even enjoy ACT II just as much as the first, if not better."

There were many things that Will Graham was, but strong in the face of such blatant desire was not one of them. When Hannibal's hands reached his shoulders, shirt hiked up to

expose his bare skin, he allowed it to be tugged off of him, and he followed Hannibal towards the bathroom.

The dead body wasn't going anywhere, anyways.

-

Much later, when both parties were efficiently clean to standard, they were let into the FBI HQ and down towards the labs by Jack, whose eyes still cut suspiciously between the two of them. Will wondered if he could see the places on his skin where Hannibal had worshipped particularly well, the places where he still felt his touch like a brand. He shook the distracting thoughts from his head and tucked his hands into his pockets so that he didn't tap them along anything.

"He was found just outside of campus, at one of the entryway arches. They think it has ties to Dante's Inferno, which is why it would have been *nice*-" he cast a particularly scathing glance at Will, "-for someone to have told me they had a letter."

"I'm sorry," Will said, and that's all there was to say. Jack grunted, Hannibal let out a quiet sigh, and they were let into the lab where Will had to stop and stare for a moment at the man on the slab.

To say he'd been gutted would be completely accurate. Like the man by the river, his insides were spilled out, laid out beside him in an unpleasant sort of rendition of the game 'Operation'. Eyes were wide and frosted with death, and horrendous, large bruise marks snaked about his neck, small rips and tears in the skin a costume shade of red.

"He was hanging from the archway with his entrails hanging out. His name's Rinaldo Pazzi, a foreign exchange student from Italy who worked on the newspaper at school. He's the reason they were able to get columns in some of the other newspapers around town for particularly interesting articles."

"He worked on the newspaper?"

"Yes. He went missing about the time that article about you and the Chesapeake Ripper was published."

Jack led him to the tables of grotesque and gory photos, his own insides squirming. The blood and guts had fallen onto the pavement by the time authorities had arrived, and their discoloration in the cool spring air was putrid, hideous. Underneath the flickering, loud lights of the lab, they were even uglier.

"We questioned Freddie Lounds, and she said we should bring you in for questioning," Jack said, standing at his shoulder.

"I'm right here. Question me if you want," Will said, touching one of the photos. "This is how Judas died," he added.

“Judas committed suicide for betraying Jesus for thirty silver. His sin was so grave he couldn’t handle his life,” Hannibal said behind them. At Jack’s nod and gesture of invitation, he walked over to the photos and grimaced.

“What did he take from him?” Will asked.

“His heart.”

“‘She ate that burning heart right out of his hand’,” Will murmured. Unable to help himself, he drummed his fingers along the long profile shot of the image, fingers pausing at the stomach. “It’s an offering to me. This person allowed the article about me to be published not only in the school newspaper, but managed to find ways to coerce other newspapers of running it, too. He betrayed the oath of reporting actual news in order to boost numbers. Something tasteless for someone…tasteless.”

“Why not go after Freddie Lounds, if she was the one to write it?” Hannibal inquired.

“She was also writing about the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will said sarcastically. “He’s anything if not very happy to read about himself.”

“This one managed to get other newspapers to post the work,” Jack said, motioning to the body.

“And it got me fired,” Will informed him. “He doesn’t want *me* to suffer because of his affections. At least, if I’m going to suffer, it will be at his hands and his hands alone.”

“That is someone that values their ability to maintain complete control of their situation and surroundings,” Hannibal noted.

Will nodded, staring down at the photo. He glanced from it to the body, then back again, swallowing heavily. He’d much rather have just stayed in bed with Hannibal, put responsibilities aside to do something stupid and lazy. This, though…he shook his head, rubbed his face. Was he going to carve up anyone that looked at him wrong? Was he going to start laying bodies outside of his apartment like a particularly pleased cat?

“He’s…going to keep doing it,” Will said. “He knows you’re speaking with me, he knows my friends, he knows my acquaintances. I don’t know what he’s holding off for, but sooner or later, he’s going to speak to me. This is…testing the waters, almost. Like he’s seeing just what you or I will ‘let’ him get away with.”

“Is that what you want from me? You want me to willingly take your hand, knowing the full ramifications of what I’m doing when I take that step?”

Yes.

“I don’t know if I can do that,” he whispered, and he closed his eyes. “You’re hurting people, and I...I see every single one behind my eyelids. I close my eyes, and I see them. Does your admiration only extend if I give in full? Does it cease if I can’t condone what you do in my name?”

I don't ask for you to condone my actions, only to understand them and refuse to stand in my way when I make such choices in the future.

"I'm two seconds away from putting you in a safe house and tossing the key," Jack said darkly.

"If you do, he'd burn down the city to find it," Will replied absently. "And he'd keep killing until I was returned."

That night, he dreamt of a burning heart searing his lips as he obediently consumed it. Jasmine petals were pressed to the wounds to heal them.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your support! :) You guys are so utterly fantastic.

Also, I've had a beef red curry with Riesling before, and let me just let y'all know that it's absolutely amazing and perfect and I'd sell my left foot if it meant I could have it made for me like...every other day.

Moscato

Chapter Notes

I know the update is a tad late, but that's because...

I eloped today! Happily just got married to my best friend/boyfriend of 3 years on a whirlwind weekend whim that started as a dare at a bar on Saturday over the phone where he proceeded to drive 7 hours to take me to my favorite spot overlooking the city to drop down on one knee. "It's dangerous to go alone," he said. "I'd love to take you with me."

That was a Sunday. On Monday, we wed. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 10: Moscato

Beverly cornered him at his newest job, Nectar. It was an odd, new age blend of old socialites wanting the latest buzz of wine and aesthetics and young college kids wishing to refine their palates with something not bought off of the Wal-Mart shelf. The hiring manager told Will that there was something vastly appealing about his messy hair and puppy-dog eyes –she had the overwhelming urge to hug him and reassure him of his place in the world. Will was more than relieved when she didn't.

"I'm off work," he said, staring down at her.

"That means you can drink with me." She motioned to the bottle of moscato she'd ordered. Will went back to the bar, requested another glass and sat down on the patio outside, eyeing her warily. The air was warm, the breeze was light, and every flower bed held the promise of bright, cheery splashes of aquamarine and lemon yellow. The time of tulips and serial killing. Spring cleaning all of the apparent ass holes in Will's life right out the door, one noose or disembowelment at a time.

"I don't know if I like moscato," he said, and she poured it anyway.

"You're keeping a lot of secrets from me," she said, sliding the glass to him. He took a sip and made a face at the almost too-sweet taste.

"I think a rosé would be better."

"I was fine with it when it was just that you'd been fired, or you were maybe seeing some kind of person that you weren't sure whether they'd last long enough to be bothered with introductions, but I do draw the line at life and death situations." She gave a pointed look to his hand on the glass, and he obediently took another drink.

“That’s fair.”

“Are you going to tell me that you forgot?”

Will had supposed she’d heard every word of theirs out on the lawn, but he’d been hoping he was wrong. Rather, he was hoping she’d pretend she hadn’t.

“That was rude of me,” he admitted. Fear made him rude.

“Margo said so, too. Alana said you were just troubled. *I* said that no one is ‘just troubled’ by a stalker and a body count.”

“The FBI is looking into it; they want to catch him as much as I want them to catch him.”

Tone was a funny thing. The words came out right, but the sound was off, his mouth not curving to fit the shape of sincerity. Will heard his own words echoing within his head, and judging by the expression on Beverly’s face, she’d heard it too. She crossed one leg over the other and considered him, squinting in a way he knew as her ‘analyst’ look. During lab, whenever she came across something particularly wonderful, she’d mutter ‘gotcha’ with that same exact look. She had him. What she’d do with him, Will wasn’t quite sure.

“You’ve always been weird,” she informed him, “so it’s hard to guess what’s Will Graham weird and what’s weird for Will Graham. You’re not okay, though. I know that much.”

“I’m trying, Beverly,” he said, turning the glass around in his hands.

“I know. It’s just funny because trying for you and trying for someone else are two different things.”

“I’m seeing someone,” he informed her, half confession and half distraction.

“That older guy?”

“He’s not that old,” Will hedged. “Ten years or so.”

“I guess the older we get, the less weird that is,” she said thoughtfully. “He was cute,” she offered as an afterthought, the compliment teasing. She shook her head at whatever thought came next, finishing off her drink and pouring another glass rather than share it.

“He helps me not focus on what’s happening around me. It’s nice.”

“I bet with age comes experience, too,” Beverly said, wagging her eyebrows at him. Will choked on a laugh and looked out at the people driving by, not wanting to get into *that* conversation.

She wasn’t wrong, though. Not in the least.

“Is it serious?” she asked when he didn’t elaborate.

“We both like not labeling things.” It was an answer without an answer. Was it serious? He thought of Hannibal’s hands, how quick they were to each part of his body, how worshipful and sensual his kisses. He was giving, and the way he held Will after sex made it seem like they’d been doing this for far longer than they had. While he didn’t exactly notch his bedpost, Will had had enough lovers to feel the difference between a fling and something like Hannibal.

Hannibal was nothing like a fling. That in itself was a little terrifying.

“Look, I’m not here to pry, Will. We’ve been friends for years, so I’m somewhat of a professional reader of the Graham-isms that other people may or may not see. But next time someone gets it in their head to start sending you Valentine’s with real, human hearts, tell me. Don’t make me find out through Margo Verger, or *god forbid* Freddie Lounds.” The last name was given with a withering, pointed stare.

“Pig hearts are okay, though, right?”

“A pig heart for a pig,” she said, kicking him under the table. Will laughed, and he was forgiven.

-

Dear Will,

Nectar is nice. They seem to hold you as one would a wounded dove, with care and adoration at the delicate and fragile beauty in their palms. You took my order with shy eyes and a wavering stance, and for the time that I was there, I saw you as, perhaps, others see you. Gentle. Afraid. The cat you pick up in the pouring rain because the box it was hiding under has collapsed and it’s soaked through to the bone.

They don’t see the parts of you that are so clear to me they resonate like the finely struck chord on a piano. They don’t see your penchant for dark thoughts and even darker fantasies. They don’t see the fine line you walk like an acrobat. I do. I think of our conversation, heartbeat to heartbeat, nothing more than a door between us. One day, dear Will, you will open that door willingly.

Yours,

-C.R.

Nectar didn’t believe in cameras. They didn’t want their guests to feel like they were being watched.

-

“I’d like to take you to the ballet,” Hannibal said as Will set his glass down.

“I’ve never been,” Will replied. Nectar was happy to allow him to chat with his customers, and Will was happy to let them think Hannibal Lecter was just a customer. It was a good, even balance.

“I wondered. Swan Lake is at the theater, and if one is to see a ballet for the first time, that would be one of the ones to see.”

“Is it a date?” Will asked. Hannibal smiled around the rim of his glass, eyes flicking up to meet his stare. Will knew what he thought about labels. Hannibal knew how much Will liked the lack of labels. He looked down and brushed imaginary lint off of the edge of his black button-up. This time, the slacks and the shirt were his. Nectar couldn’t give a shit as long as they wore all black.

“It’s next Friday, seven o’clock,” Hannibal said, setting the glass down. He turned and adjusted it so that the sunlight from the window hit the color and made small, refracted teardrops of ruby scatter across the table. Will studied the colors, resisted the urge to reach out and drag his finger along one. Times and days were dates, but he wouldn’t say it, and Hannibal knew he wouldn’t say it.

“I’ll go.”

Back at the bar, while exchanging dirty glasses for clean ones, tossing napkins and filling orders, Will brushed shoulders with a girl a few years younger than him. Her brown hair was mousy, pulled back into a messy bun, but her blue eyes were sharp, assessing.

“You’re Will Graham –the new guy,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I’m Abigail Hobbs,” she said, and out of the corner of his eye he saw her stare down at his hands rather than her own.

“Nice to meet you,” he said.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “We’re closing together tonight.”

“You’ll have to show me the ropes.”

“Yeah,” she said again, but he could tell that wasn’t what she wanted to say. Her eyes flicked up to meet his, then away quickly where she busied herself with garnishing a few drinks.

It wasn’t until closing, when they were the only two left that she managed to say what was on her mind. Will had been expecting it, tensed for the blow that would probably make him lose this job after only a week of being there. Job number four, meet your end at the hands of a girl that appeared too young to legally drink.

“The Chesapeake Ripper is killing people for you,” she said, and he paused, chair poised midair to set on the table top.

“…Yes.” He set it down gently, rocking back on his heels.

“You didn’t react to my name,” she added when he didn’t say anything else.

"…I didn't," he agreed.

"Most people do. You see, my dad killed people for me, too." She flipped a few more chairs over onto their respective tables, avoiding his stare. Will tapped his fingers along the table beside him, watching her smudge move behind the bar. The low, dim light of the lamps behind the bar cast dark, wicked streaks along her face as she finally looked back at him. He couldn't see her dagger eyes or her wind-chafed skin in the dark.

"How many?"

"Too many. He almost got me, too." She motioned to her neck, to the lovely floral scarf she'd worn all throughout her shift despite the heat of the kitchen in the back or the sun outside. "I don't like people seeing the scar."

"What happened to him?"

"The FBI shot him when he was sawing into my neck. The Minnesota Shrike. I had to get out of Minnesota after that."

"Did they make articles about you, too?"

"And a few books."

They shared a grim stare with one another, the kind of look one can only give to another that knows exactly what it's like to have that kind of target on their back.

"This is my fourth job this semester," Will confessed, and Abigail nodded.

"Six in one summer, until one of them made the mistake of telling me to my face that serial killers just couldn't sell clothing in their store." She smirked, pleased with herself. "I made a lot of money with the hours they had to give me in the settlement."

"Did you have to work with that hiring manager?"

"Part of the deal was that she was fired…I think they called it rash incompetency."

"Did he say that he loved you in the end?" Will asked. A much darker question.

"He said he loved me, he was sorry, and that it was all going to be okay soon." She smiled a little, counting the till as he grabbed a broom and began sweeping everything out from under the tables. "The guy looked a little like you, the one that finally got him. His name was Will, and we were checked into the same psychiatric ward for a bit. Guess even at my father's worst, it still messed a guy like him up that he had to be the one to kill him, even if he deserved it."

"You moved on, though."

"I did. I got my GED, I moved, and I made money off of one of the books because it was pure slander. Easiest libel case they'd ever had in court," she boasted, but the thought sobered her up in the silence after. "…I guess I'm telling you this because there is a life after.

It feels like forever, like there's no…end. There's no end and you just keep going because that's what people do, no matter what. We keep going. But there is an end, and then it's a new beginning, and I'm doing great."

When they finished closing, Will studied her in the red glow of the streetlight they waited under so that they could cross the street. She had a wind-chafed, lightly freckled face, the kind of girl people would have made fun of when they were young for the spots on her skin, the kind of face that grew up pretty and all of the boys regretted it. There was sorrow there, though. The kind of lines around the eyes and nose that don't go away with time, merely soften. She noticed his scrutiny and smiled like she understood exactly what Will was searching for.

"Was there ever a time you thought you wouldn't live to see the end?" he wondered.

"Every night that I closed my eyes while living in that house," she replied.

Will could relate to that part, too.

-

He woke with a knife to his throat.

It wasn't the kind of waking that made him leap to the blade in surprise, and for that he was grateful. It was the sort of waking that was much like the way he'd realized he was even in this sort of mess with a serial killer –slowly, then suddenly all at once. He inhaled shortly, and in the back of his mind he recalled having the lamp on when he'd fallen asleep. It wasn't on anymore, and the curtains had been drawn. It was just him, the darkness, and the Chesapeake Ripper.

"Are you going to kill me?" he whispered against the knife. It was cool against his hot skin, a fear sweat breaking out along his temples. The Ripper shifted beside the bed, then he was straddling Will, the kind of stance that spoke of intimacy, both in life and in the taking of it. His eyes, still adjusting to the dark of the room, couldn't see whether or not the man shook his head or nodded. His panic, starting in his stomach and worming its way everywhere else, wouldn't let his eyes adjust.

"If you are…I'd like to see your face first. Please." Silence. If the Chesapeake Ripper spoke, Will would know him –why else would he be silent? He'd been to Nectar, and no matter how much Will scrambled to try and remember each and every customer, no one ever stood out to him. The only words he'd ever knowingly heard from him had been, 'don't move,' and it was guttural enough he'd not recognized it. A forced voice. A fake voice.

"I met someone today…someone like me." The words came, and he swallowed convulsively, the tip of the knife digging in. He shuddered against it, eyes closed tightly. He wet his lips and tried to make his tongue work. "Her father killed girls in her name. I looked it up online after –couldn't help it. The Minnesota Shrike, who impaled his victims on the antlers in his trophy room in order to gut them properly.

“She told me that it was going to be okay. She said that he loved her up until the end. She’s in college now, going to classes, working. He died, though. He was killed in the moment that he was going to take her life, the final victim.” He opened his eyes, and in the stillness he could make out faint shapes, outlines. Broad shoulders. Baseball cap. Faceless shadow.

“It was alright, though, she said. She lived, and there was an end. I didn’t know how to tell her that I didn’t like the ending. Why did he have to die, just so that she could live? Why did he have to end so that she could have a new beginning?”

The shadow shifted, thighs tightening around Will’s waist. He flinched from it, from the closeness. Their weight dug into his guts, and he tentatively moved his hands, inching them forward until he was able to grasp the Chesapeake Ripper’s knees, gripping them tightly.

“Why did he have to die just so that she could live?” he whispered again. “Why does everyone think that the happy ending is when the FBI kills you?”

Silence. Poised above him, the Ripper didn’t brush his hands away, merely held still. Waiting. Waiting for what? Will swallowed convulsively, cleared his throat.

“I feel…like I’m bleeding into you. That if something happened, I wouldn’t know how to move on, how to have a life where you weren’t somewhere behind me. Can one of us exist without the other? Can one of us live while the other is dead?”

The knife’s pressure lifted, albeit only a fraction of an inch. Will gave a start when a hand, warm and gloved slid along his jaw to cup his cheek, but when it only caressed his skin, he found himself leaning into it, letting out a quiet huff of breath.

“Did you kill that man because he not only got me fired again, but because he made me a target in all of the major newspapers?” he asked.

Very deliberately, the thumb sliding against his cheek tapped once.

“One tap yes, two taps no?”

Another tap.

“Am I to only suffer if you are the one to cause it?”

One tap.

“Did you hang him like Judas because you felt he shouldn’t be able to live with himself?”

First one tap; as an afterthought, two more taps.

“Yes and no,” Will murmured thoughtfully. He slid his hands along coarse jeans, pausing at the middle of the thighs before sliding back down. “You didn’t kill Freddie Lounds because you love the kind of stuff she writes about you. Even before me.”

One tap.

"Jack Crawford wants to put me in a safe house until they catch you. I told him no, and where you haven't…tried to kill me yet, he can't. That he knows of…we don't communicate. I told him you'd burn the city down to find me."

One tap.

"You'd start killing more until I was returned to you."

One tap.

"You're going to kill me one day."

Two taps.

"You're going to devour me, though. Until there's nothing left but the parts of me that ache for you." Will slid his hands back up the length of his legs, and underneath his touch the muscles clenched.

One tap.

"Is that it? You want me to ache for you?" He thought of his poetry, of his prose that made his knees weak. "You want me to feel a stab of hunger at the thought of you and find nourishment at the very sight?"

A soft sigh, then one tap. Against his stomach, he felt the growing signs of arousal, and he closed his eyes tightly, tensing.

"You want me to eat your burning heart," he whispered, and the Ripper's hand slid from his jaw to his chin, wrenching his head up. His kiss was rough, needing, and Will's hands tightened on his knees, dragging their way up to his thighs where he gripped furiously, willing bruises from his fingertips to sink deep. It smelled of dirt, of secrecy and a musky undertone, although if that was from a bottle or from the man himself, Will couldn't say.

He broke the kiss and pressed his forehead to Will's, the knife sliding into his skin enough that Will winced and tried to pull away. The Ripper's breath came sharp, his hips rolling down against Will, and Will trembled, with fear or with want he couldn't say.

"Please don't," he whispered, and the Ripper stiffened above him. His thumb brushed Will's bottom lip, as though he could feel just how hard he'd pressed against him, and he brushed his nose against Will's as he pecked lightly once, twice. It seemed odd, coming from him. Gentle. Apologetic.

"I don't think I could do…*that*...not knowing all of you. Please don't make me." He forced the words out, lips brushing against the Ripper's, and after a half-held breath, the Ripper nodded.

He sat up, and the knife disappeared. Will exhaled a heavy breath and laid his head back deep into the pillow, relief a balm that spread through his skin to the muscle below. The

Chesapeake Ripper placed a hand over Will's fingers that lightly drummed against his leg, stilling the motion. What had Hannibal called it? Unease? The Ripper seemed to sense it, too.

"Thank you," Will said sincerely.

He wasn't quite sure how long they lay like that, Ripper poised over him, holding his hand against his leg. It was enough that the fear abated, but only just. It was enough that when he finally slid off of him and departed, Will missed the contact, the warmth.

He tried very, very hard to ignore just how much he missed it.

-

Dear Will,

I long for the day that you ache for me.

Yours,

-C.R.

It was pinned to his bedroom door, and Will stared at it for a long time. He thought about taking it down, but in the end he left it there, for reasons he wasn't entirely prepared to explain.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for your constant support for my writing!! It's a passion of mine that you guys just keep helping me maintain, and that's just something that makes me completely indebted to you. :)

Cortese

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 11: Cortese

He was able to find a tux with the fastidious aid of Beverly armed with coupons and Alana's unredeemed gift cards, and he didn't have to break the bank to do it. Alana relinquished her hold on them with enough ease that he wondered if she'd even bothered to look at how much was on each. There was a Visa one with twenty-five, an Amazon one with one-hundred, and they used a Jamm's Frozen Yogurt one to grab food between stores.

Beverly had far more fun picking out the outfits than Will did trying them on.

"No offense, but I'm pretty sure this is Sugar Daddy territory. A ballet? You're going to bang him tonight, right?" Beverly eyed one critically and gave a solemn shake of her head. Will uttered a short curse and walked back into the dressing room irritably.

"No labels," he reminded her through the door.

"No labels is a lot like saying Sugar Daddy without having to be judged for it," she tossed back.

"It's not like that. If he was our age and doing this, you wouldn't think that."

"If he was our age, he wouldn't be buying tickets that cost a couple hundred a piece just to take you out in hopes that he gets laid tonight."

Will gave her a particularly dark look when he walked out of the fitting room, and she smiled sweetly.

"This is the one. Perfect."

He managed to shave, and he combed his hair back with a pomade that Beverly assured him wasn't too greasy. When Hannibal pulled into the parking lot, he was sure he looked utterly stupid, over-dressed and ridiculously corny with his dress shoes and his Ross tie. He stuffed his hands into his pockets so that he didn't tap them about, and he tried to appear normal, nonchalant. Hannibal stepped out of the car, and the look he gave him made every single self-conscious thought flee his body. He felt decidedly hungry, seeing the way Hannibal looked at him.

"You look sharp," Hannibal said. His eyes drank Will in.

"Beverly picked it out," Will admitted. Hannibal circled the car and opened the door for him, and his gaze, burgundy in the sunlight, trailed from his shoes all the way to the top of his head, much as it had in the bar of Belle Bleu when Will first told him he'd been let go. It made his hands tingle. It made him want to forget the ballet entirely.

“She has excellent taste.”

Once Will was securely tucked into the car, Hannibal drove out of town, to Baltimore. While his normal, everyday attire was never complete without a tie, a pocket square and supple leather dress shoes, Will had to admit that he somehow managed to take that to another level entirely. His black silk tie was sharp against a white so bright it almost hurt, and the satin lapels of his jacket shined. Just underneath, he saw the hints of a three-button vest, and a small chain for what had to be a pocketwatch.

The line getting in moved quickly, and Will was buffeted gently about by a crowd of chiffon dresses, coiffed hair and hushed murmurings of excitement. No one stared at him, no one pointed and whispered. In a crowd like this, no one knew to look for the oddities among the many faces. When they were led away from the main floor and taken to a private balcony, he cast Hannibal a curious glance, but Hannibal gave nothing away. It wasn’t until they were seated at the very front that he removed his jacket, laid it across the seat beside him, and gave Will a conspiratorial look.

“Seeing a ballet is an intimate affair. I bought the balcony so that you could enjoy it without the discomfort of having so many bodies pressed too close.”

“You bought out the balcony,” Will repeated, not quite believing what he was hearing.

“I wanted you to enjoy this as much as I knew I would,” he said, as though it were an obvious thing to do.

Will wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. In the back of his head, Beverly gloated.

When the lights dimmed though, and Hannibal’s fingers drew lazy designs on the back of Will’s tux jacket, all thoughts of sugar daddies and age gaps vanished. The stage lights brightened, the music notes began to hum, and everything else ceased to exist. A coil in his chest tightened, tightened, and with each note struck, with each arched, graceful turn of a dancer, it twisted until he was sure it’d snap. Hannibal continued to drag his fingertips over his back, electric tingles gliding across the fabric to dive beneath his skin.

Afterwards, they were stopped by a woman in a red sheath dress with a bob whose lines were just severe enough to cut skin. She appraised Will from head to toe, then shifted and jutted a hip out, arms crossed elegantly.

“You didn’t tell me you were coming, Hannibal, darling,” she said, eyebrow arched.

“It was a spur of the moment decision, Octavia, my apologies,” he said lightly, a flicker of remorse on his face. His hand that’d ghosted along the small of Will’s back dropped so that he could clasp it behind his back.

“You didn’t tell me that you had a date, either,” she added, petulantly glancing to Will.

He tried to make his grimace look like more of a smile, but he wasn’t sure he succeeded. He looked away from them, drawn towards the feel of a pair of eyes fastened

anxiously in their direction. A short, portly man in a tux much like Will's rocked onto the balls of his feet, then back, gripping a program tightly in one hand. Beside him, a much taller, lither man stood, dark eyes mildly curious as he looked from his friend to Will.

"Allow me to introduce Will Graham, a good friend of mine," Hannibal said. "Will, this is Mrs. Octavia Wilson, a woman of great taste and refinement."

"A pleasure," Will said, looking away from the man eagerly turned in their direction.

"Indeed. Has he cooked for you, yet? Hannibal, tell me you've cooked for him."

"I've had the pleasure once or twice," Hannibal said with a laugh.

"You know, he used to do these wonderful, lavish dinners where he'd cook almost everything himself –hasn't done one in months, I'd say." She sniffed, personally affronted. Out of the corner of his eye, Will saw the short man make his way over, program clenched tightly.

"You can't force inspiration, Octavia. It is either there, or it's not," Hannibal protested. Will turned away from the people walking over, hoping a silent dismissal would keep them away, but still they moved, just behind him and brimming with an emotion that made desperation crawl onto the tip of his tongue to lurk.

Don't mention the Chesapeake Ripper; for the love of god, don't mention him or the newspaper…let people think I'm normal here...

"Hannibal, I think that man is attempting to get your attention," Octavia said, and Hannibal looked over Will's shoulder to see the person in question, eyebrow quirked. Will glanced over his face, surprised to see a flicker of annoyance.

"Hello, Franklyn," he said politely. Will turned and moved out of the way somewhat so that the man could enter into their circle. He rocked from his heels to his toes, prepared to launch himself into it if Will hadn't given him room.

"I saw you," Franklyn said excitedly. "Up in the balcony."

"Yes," Hannibal agreed, and it was the first time Will saw utter distaste flicker across Hannibal's face before it was gone, snuffed out as though it never were. There was mild relief, though, to know that Franklyn had been staring at Hannibal, not Will.

"I think he was more interested in you than in watching the performance," the man behind him said with a short laugh.

"Oh, Dr. Lecter, where are my manners; this is my friend Tobias. Tobias, this is Dr. Lecter."

"A pleasure, doctor," Tobias said, shaking his hand. His eyes were dark, the chandelier lights above reflecting odd designs in them. Despite his smile, he didn't sound pleased at all.

“This is my good friend Will Graham and Mrs. Wilson. Franklyn is…” Hannibal floundered, his hand falling to his side limply. The flicker of distaste lurked in the curve of his jaw. Will had never seen him at a loss for words before, and his gaze locked onto Hannibal's face, equal parts amused and surprised.

“I’m his patient,” Franklyn said, and Hannibal’s polite smile tensed, frozen.

“Yes. My patient.” The words were clipped, pronounced with care. Will drummed his fingers on the side of his thigh.

“I knew you liked the arts like this, Dr. Lecter. I knew it,” Franklyn said.

“Yes.” Hannibal nodded, and Will looked away from the two of them, wanting to help ease the tension that stifled his breath but not entirely sure how.

Just behind Franklyn’s embarrassing display, his friend Tobias stood, and Will was surprised to see him not looking to Hannibal, but to Will instead. His brows furrowed, trying to place Will somewhere, and Will broke eye contact, swallowing with difficulty.

“Well, when you do another dinner party, *please* let me know, Hannibal.” Octavia seemed to sense the same whisper of tension and discomfort that everyone else did. It was palpable, and Will wanted to wipe it from his skin. “Bring your friend Will along, too. I’d love to pick his brain about the rendition done here tonight.”

Will noted the distinct lack of invitation for Hannibal’s patient.

“Of course, Octavia. When inspiration strikes, you’ll be the first to know,” Hannibal promised, and Octavia made her getaway with poise. Will caught Hannibal’s eyes, and he consciously pressed his palm flat to his leg to stop the infernal tapping.

“You have dinner parties?” Franklyn seemed positively delighted.

“When the mood strikes. If you’ll excuse us, though, Franklyn, we have a previous engagement. Tobias, a pleasure to meet you.”

“A pleasure indeed,” Tobias said, watching Will.

Hannibal’s hand brushed against Will’s when they reached the outside, and he clasped it once they were in the car. The coil inside of Will’s chest tightened.

“I’ve never seen you run from a conversation,” Will said once they were on the interstate.

“I did no such thing,” Hannibal objected.

“The inanities of small talk brought you to one word answers,” Will retorted with a snort. His fingers twitched in Hannibal’s grip, and he squeezed tightly in response. “You did mention once that small talk bored you.”

“I find speaking with patients outside of a professional environment disquieting. Franklyn is…exuberant.”

“That’s a good way of saying he has a crush on you,” Will snickered.

“Was it so obvious?” Hannibal sounded almost pained. Personally affronted, more like. Will was enraptured by the way he seemed near-disgusted.

“I mean, *I* saw it,” Will said. “Same way I saw you look like you were trying to…to remove your teeth with your bare hands.”

“Colorful,” Hannibal quipped. “My mind was, actually, in far more pleasant places than that.”

“Where was it?”

“I was thinking of how delightful it’d be to remove your clothes.” The coil tightened. The pressure was harsh on his ribs, and Will worried that it’d explode from him.

They made it all the way to the apartment before it snapped.

It was the darkness, Will supposed, and the way the small light from the kitchenette accented the planes of Hannibal’s cheeks, jaw and neck. The light reflected in his eyes of jet, and lurking in the depths of them, hunger of an instinctual kind made his heart begin to pound.

“What is that look you’re giving me, Will?” Hannibal asked quietly. He removed his outer jacket, hanging it on the hook by the door.

“I guess I was just thinking about how nice it’d be to remove your clothes, too,” Will said, and the spring snapped. Hannibal turned to him, and it couldn’t be said who moved first –Will or Hannibal. Either way, eager hands fumbled, fingers stuttering over vest buttons and shirt buttons and coat buttons, and *why were there so many buttons*.

Hannibal pressed him to the door of the apartment, his kisses fervent and dominant. His touch was scalding, and Will couldn’t help the groan of pleasure as Hannibal’s tongue slid along his bottom lip and pushed its way in, hands finally managing to tear the shirt from his shoulders and exposing his skin to the cool air. Hannibal’s shirt didn’t fare so well; there was a small sound of something ripping, and a few buttons scattered to the floor, the noise distant as he let out a breath of laughter and tossed the shirt to the side.

“That was my favorite shirt,” Hannibal murmured against his lips, hands gliding down to explore his chest. Will nipped at his bottom lip, tugging it.

“I’ll buy you a new one,” he promised, arching against him.

Amid the scuffling of shoes, and socks, tripping over the dress slacks abandoned on the floor and falling into one another in the hall, Will found himself poised over Hannibal on the bed, dizzy off of the feel of their skin pressed tight together. He ground his hips down,

and the hiss of pleasure was heady, a sense of power and control as he dipped his face low to bite along his chest and stomach.

"Are you just going to tease me?" Hannibal asked, his shortness of breath belying the sense of impatience. Will grinned against his stomach, pressing a light, barely-there kiss to it.

"What's wrong with an appetizer?" he murmured, fingertips gripping Hannibal's hips to keep them in place. "Don't you like to tell me that we work up to the main course?"

"Sometimes even I like to skip to the main course." His hands slid into Will's hair, tangling within the curls.

"Naughty," he whispered, nipping at the hip bone. "What are we going to do about that?"

When he reached where he intended to go, Hannibal's eloquence dropped decidedly as he informed Will just what they should do about that.

-

Hannibal slept possessively, one hand wrapped around Will's torso to keep him close. Whenever Will woke, there was always a hazy panic that it was the Ripper, but with each steady, deep inhale and exhale, he'd smell his cologne and his heart would stop slamming into his ribs so angrily. It was Hannibal. Hannibal was safe.

He liked to lay like that, no matter whose house they ended up at, Hannibal's arm tossed across his stomach, his eyes glued to the ceiling. He liked to sync his breathing with the man beside him, deep, full inhales with slow, lazy exhales, a pause between like he had all of the time in the world. It made the mirrors in his mind stop reflecting the world around him, as Hannibal had put it. It made things turn into a lax, peaceful entropy.

He always knew when Hannibal woke because his grip would tighten reflexively, pulling him an inch or so closer until the strength of the half-asleep ultimately failed and Hannibal had to resort to moving himself over so that he could nuzzle his neck with lazy, half-hearted kisses. His five o'clock shadow always itched across his skin, tickling.

This time though, his mouth paused at the two cuts at his neck, and he seemed to not know what to do about them. His mouth frowned around them, puzzled.

"I saw these before," he murmured, rocks in his throat. "They aren't shaving cuts."

"Good morning," Will said evasively.

"I thought to ask yesterday, but you looked so sharp and pleased in your tux that I didn't want to spoil it."

"Don't spoil it now; I'm having a good morning."

"Are you? I'm glad." He pressed another kiss to the marred skin, this one pointed.

“I had a dream we made omelets. I think I even have eggs in the fridge.”

“What put those cuts to your skin so close to your jugular?” Hannibal propped himself up with his elbow, sliding his hand from Will’s side to his heartbeat. It jerked irregularly against his palm, another palpitation. He’d never gone to the doctor for it.

“A knife.”

“Who held the knife?”

“Is that even a question?” Will snapped. He sat up and turned, letting his bare feet press to the shabby carpet. The silence of the steady morning was ruined. Hannibal slid the pads of his fingers along his back, creating goosebumps along his bare skin.

“Your admirer.”

“My admirer,” Will agreed miserably. Quietly.

“He was close enough to kiss,” Hannibal commented, and Will balked at the statement.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Did you intend to tell someone the Chesapeake Ripper found his way to you again?” A pause. “Does Jack Crawford know?”

“No. It’s fine.”

“Will, there are many things I’m more than content to let slide between us because we are adults and have our own, separate and distinct lives, but if you’re going to tell me a lie, make it a better one.”

He kissed Will’s back to soften the sting of his words. Will nodded, accepting the rebuke, refusing to apologize for it. Hannibal slid out of bed, found his underwear on the floor, then made his way to the door, either to shower or cook breakfast, Will wasn’t sure. It didn’t open, though, and he looked over when he didn’t leave, confused.

He’d forgotten about the note.

Hannibal plucked it from the door, and the tack fell to the carpet soundlessly. Will couldn’t see his face, but he could imagine the expression –anger? Confusion? Distrust? He’d thought about taking it from the door many, many times, but each time he’d stopped, fingers pausing at the line that’d been dragged under the looping cursive of *ache*. It’d dug in so hard it’d ripped the fibers of the paper, and Will wondered at it. His pinky would dip into the torn part of the paper, and he’d leave it for another day, the stain of the ink deep beneath the layers of his skin like a bad tattoo.

“Interesting,” Hannibal said, and his tone gave nothing away. Will stared at his back, bare and taut with muscle, a sliver of unease uncurling inside of him.

“It’s escalating,” he said, like that could somehow explain everything that was happening to him.

“These things do,” Hannibal agreed. He glanced back to Will, note held out like a sordid offering.

“I don’t want it,” he said.

Hannibal was out of the door before he said, “Of course you do.”

Chapter End Notes

Always love me some Tobias and Franklyn! Thank you for your continued support and appreciation for me having this weird obsession with cannibals and grumpy, fluffy-haired empaths :) I've honestly loved seeing you guys guessing different things that would happen next/if it's really Hannibal that's stalking him/theories as to how it will end. It just makes me so much more excited for when that time comes!!

Pinotage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 12: Pinotage

Dear Will,

We die,
Welcoming Bluebeards to our darkening closets,
Stranglers to our outstretched necks,
Stranglers, who neither care nor
care to know that
Death is internal.

We pray,
Savoring sweet the teethed lies,
Bellying the grounds before alien gods,
Gods, who neither know nor
wish to know that
Hell is internal.

We love,
Rubbing the nakednesses with gloved hands,
Inverting our mouths in tongued kisses,
Kisses that neither touch nor
care to touch if
Love is internal.

Yours,

-C.R.

Will called Jack, and it went to voicemail.

"Jack, it's Will Graham…I think there's a body. It's…it's a poem, but I don't know what it means. I don't know what to look for. He says everything is internal, everything is… no matter what another does to you, they won't truly *know* because it's internal. I don't know what he's trying to say to me. Is he saying I'm an exception? Is he saying I did something and can't see it because it's on the inside?

"I looked up the Pazzi family, though. I think he did that to him because the Pazzi's in Italy have an ancestor that died the same way, a shameful person with a shameful past and a bad family reputation to go with it. He came here to get away from that. I think he was toying with you as much as he was trying to defend me, killing him that way. I don't know…I don't know anymore. I don't wonder why three. Why three? Why not?

"…I think there's a body, though. Every poem a body, right?"

He dragged his fingers through the lavender, picking up one that'd become bent in transit. With slow deliberation, he placed it on his tongue and savored it.

-

The body was found by a student in the forensics lab at the university, splayed out on a table with almost every single tool accessible in the room pierced through his skin. Will and Beverly were stopped before they could enter the building by a stern police officer that informed them that class was cancelled. The whispers of the students nearby revealed why.

"Gross, someone got a picture of it," Beverly said, holding it up. Will grimaced at the grotesque image, looking to the sidewalk instead.

"It's the wound man," he said when he could catch his breath. His tongue tasted like lavender.

"That old school picture? I…wait, I see it," she said, tilting her head. On an Iphone, the resolution of the picture was almost as good as seeing it in person. Almost. "Hasn't he wound man'd someone before?"

"He has," said Will, stuffing his hands into pockets. He clenched them into fists, considered calling Jack again. Reconsidered since Jack would find a way to him.

"Running out of inspiration?" Beverly asked.

"Running out of patience," Will said, and the glance Beverly gave him was equal parts concern and curiosity. "Death is internal," he added.

"Not for this guy, it wasn't."

-

Tobias was at Nectar when he clocked on, and he smiled pleasantly at Will, like they were somewhat good friends.

"Will Graham, right?" he asked hesitantly. His eyes still looked as flat as they had at the theater.

"Yes, what can I get for you this afternoon?"

"Do you have a good pinotage on hand? I've been *aching* to try one," he said, and maybe it was the way his lips curled on the 'a' and his lashes fluttered at the curl of the 'ing', but it set Will on edge.

"We do," he said, and he walked around the bar without pausing to ask if he wanted a glass or a bottle. Will decided for him in the back that he'd only get a glass.

He set the glass down and drummed his fingers along the server tray, casting a glance back towards Abigail who chatted with a few regulars at the counter.

"You seem nervous," Tobias said, taking a sip of the wine. He let out a quiet sigh of appreciation, and he nodded in thanks. "Lovely. Lovely."

"Let me know if I can get you anything else," Will informed him.

"There is, actually. I didn't want to ask while we were at the ballet of all places, but you're *that* Will Graham, aren't you?"

"…Yes." Will studied the edge of the table. *That Will Graham.* Good grief.

"So you're the one the Chesapeake Ripper is keenly interested in," Tobias said, and Will heard a tinge of awe in his voice. It made his skin crawl.

"I wouldn't call it that."

"You'd call it something more?" Tobias asked.

"I'd call it something less." Will glanced to Tobias' flat, steady stare, and he looked over his shoulder instead.

"Oh, I wouldn't sell yourself so short," Tobias said kindly. "I'm sure there's something about you that has him running around town with a fire lit under him."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, he must have some motive, doesn't he? Something about you to inspire him?"

"Are you a reporter?" Will asked, taking a half-step back. He looked about for Freddie Lounds with her looming camera and trademark red hair.

"No, I'm an owner of a string shop for musical instruments," he said, and he lifted a hand up, like he could ease the panic starting to build just under Will's skin. "No affiliations with any reporters, either."

"Okay."

"I suppose I just find myself thinking about it every time the news reports another case. After that leak from the FBI about love letters and symbolic murders, I had to wonder just what would drive a serial killer to the point that their work is a homage for someone else and not themselves. When I saw you, that curiosity grew." His eyes raked over Will, assessing.

"Will?" At the sound of Abigail's voice, Will turned, eager for an escape. "I need you to do some inventory in the back, like you said you would?"

"Sorry," he said to Tobias. Then, "I'm on it, Abigail."

He stayed in the back until Abigail gave him a thumb's up to come out. When he did, there was no sign of Tobias, and Abigail scrutinized him with a pitying expression.

-

That night, he found Hannibal waiting beside his bike, jacket laid over his arm as he looked up to the stars. Will absently waved goodbye to one of his co-workers, a guy named Jake, and he studied Hannibal in profile; the clean lines of his suit, the elegant turn of his cheek. As if sensing the study, he turned and studied Will back, a faint smile gracing his lips.

"Good evening," he greeted warmly.

"Late night stroll?" Will asked, walking over to him.

"I thought to admire the stars, but it's difficult in the city. Do you want to go for a drive?"

Twenty minutes out of the city there was a park called Wolf Trap, and they parked in a public space by a gathering of picnic tables. Nothing but the wind and the trees encircled them, and Will laid down on a table to stare up, Hannibal seated just to the side of him. His clasped hands brushed Will's shoulders as he shifted.

"He killed someone again," Will said. He marveled at the stars that he could so vividly see when just before they'd been dimmed, quieted by the city light.

"I saw the news. Did you receive another poem?"

"I'm trying to understand it. It's…internal. Everything he's done, everything he's said, it's internal. It's in him, it's…digging into me. People hurt us without realizing, and they don't care to see because it's internal. We prostrate ourselves to them, torture ourselves with the designs of others, and the struggles we face are unknown. I don't know if he's telling me I've hurt him, or if he's realizing how much he's hurt me."

"Does the knowing matter so much to you?" Hannibal asked. He looked from the stars to Will's face.

"It shouldn't."

"But it does."

"It does," Will agreed. "I think that means there's something fundamentally wrong with me."

"Wanting to understand the motivations of a person that arguably holds control over you is completely understandable, Will. You may not ask him 'how high' when he demands that you jump, but you do find your thoughts consumed with him. Your nights are spent turning what little words he's given you over and over again in your head until you're dizzy from it.

“How many nights have you fallen asleep in a drunken stupor, needing the alcohol to give you the sort of calm to rest?”

“Too many,” Will admitted.

“And here you are, staring up at the vast beauty of a clear night sky, unable to appreciate it because of him.”

“I think…constantly worrying about what he’s going to do next has given me a better appreciation of things like this, actually” said Will after a moment of tracing Cassiopeia with his eyes. “It gives me a great appreciation of time spent with you and my friends.”

“I’m glad to be a part of it, even if my romantic attachments are in competition with the Chesapeake Ripper,” Hannibal said lightly. Will ignored the barbed joke.

“How do you see him, as a psychiatrist?” he asked curiously. “You said your work wasn’t all depression and mid-life crisis.” His teeth worried over his bottom lip. “You said you’ve had your fair share of darkness.”

“You want me to summarize the Chesapeake Ripper in so many words?” he asked, surprised.

“Choose them wisely,” Will replied, turning his head. He studied Hannibal’s jawline, the dip of the collar into his neck as he swallowed heavily.

“I always do. Words are powerful. How they are delivered, how they are received is everything. We can both create and destroy with words, and that is a very powerful tool.”

“Could you use them on him?”

“I don’t know if I want to,” Hannibal confessed. “The thought lends itself a very… slippery slope. Will you take on my thoughts of the Ripper as your own, or will you cast them aside because you have a better idea?”

“You think I’d have a better idea?”

“He is interested in you for a reason, isn’t he? He trusts you to see the truth of the matter, all bias aside. You assume his point of view, and you empathize with his feelings for you.”

“And what a thought that is,” Will murmured. He looked back up to the stars, trying to pinpoint the satellites among them. “When he…held a knife to me, I couldn’t see his face. I told him…that it felt like we were bleeding into one another.”

“What did he do?”

“He didn’t speak, but his hold on me tightened. That excites him; the idea that we will blur so far into one another that one cannot live without the other.”

“Why haven’t you told Jack?” Hannibal reached over and clasped Will’s hand to stop him tapping his fingers along his ribs.

Will didn’t answer for a long time. He stared at the stars, found comfort in the shushing noise of the wind through the leaves. He opened his mouth several times to try and force the words out, but they were dirty on his tongue, and he didn’t want to ruin the taste of the air he breathed with them. Hannibal waited, patient, like this time that dripped around them held no motive but to hold its breath until he was ready.

“I feel…defensive of him,” Will said at last, squeezing Hannibal’s hand tightly. “He sees what this does to me, how it makes my mind…” His voice trailed off. He tried again. “How unstable it makes me feel. To see and understand these things, he knows that it makes me afraid of myself, of my capacity to understand these things like they’re my own thoughts and designs. Despite his choice in putting me in such an unbalanced state, it’s like…he wants to contain the mess he’s creating for me. Like an oil spill.”

“He wants you to rely on him, even though that reliance is a direct correlation to his actions done to you in the first place,” Hannibal said. “He is concerned ultimately with power and control. By keeping you imbalanced, you rely on him for stability.”

“You said that you see me as the mongoose to have under the house when the snakes slither by. I don’t feel that useful. I feel more like…a chipped mug, passed through too many hands before it becomes what the youngest child in the family gets to put their toothbrush in.”

“I don’t know about that, Will,” Hannibal replied kindly. “Anyone with the power to take a merciless serial killer and make them write poetry instead has a rare, powerful gift.”

“He’s still killing people, even as he writes the poetry,” Will pointed out.

“Even so; I believe you hold more sway over him than you think.”

Hannibal had chosen his words carefully indeed. When they finally headed to Will’s apartment, he thought of the many ways and times that the Ripper had delicately moved about his needs, passing notes to calm him in his presence, pressing mouth to mouth in apology, wondering at his ability to dream.

-

Dear Will,

I see you’ve acquired another admirer that lurks about your place of work. First the doctor, now the musician –do I have to fight for your attentions? Or are they only a distraction because I have not been forthcoming enough? How very rude of me, my dear Will, to leave you in this state of suspense. I will have to remedy that.

Yours,

-C.R.

Will uncurled the odd, thin material from the letter, confused. It was no flower; that much was obvious. It looked more like the strings to a violin, and he dropped it to the table with a sharp hiss of breath when he realized that he must have gotten it from Tobias Budge's shop.

-

"Hey, Jack, it's Will. If you don't answer next time I call, I'll just go to the FBI and talk to them in person. I think there's a man who's taken an interest in me that is now a target of the Chesapeake Ripper. His name is Tobias Budge. If you could make sure he doesn't die, that'd be…well, I'm tired of thinking about all of these bodies. I'm just tired."

-

Tobias made a habit of Will.

He tried, Will supposed, to be like Hannibal, asking about his welfare and the Chesapeake Ripper over his favorite pinotage. The difference was in the tone, the eyes, and the way his mouth curled around the glass. When Will could bring himself to look up at him, the delivery and the speech seemed rehearsed, the sort of tone-practice that one does in front of a mirror in order to sound sincere when they're not.

He didn't like Tobias making a habit of him.

He was never there when Hannibal was, and for that Will was relieved. He didn't want to have to explain that his patient's friend had taken a liking to him –better yet, he didn't want to have to explain that his patient's friend had taken a liking to the Chesapeake Ripper, and by proxy, him. After he'd seen the note pinned to Will's door, there were times that he'd survey Will with a certain sort of expression bordering on possessive. When they had sex, no matter whose house they ended up at, there was an edge of something unsettling in the way his hands gripped Will's hips, in the way he whispered praises in his ear. After, he'd sleep with Will's back to his chest, his arm wrapped around his waist with his hand pressed insistently to his chest. Hunger. Hunger was a good word for it.

As was the way of all things, though, such luck could not last.

"Do you work tomorrow?" Tobias asked, standing up from his usual table.

"I don't think so," Will hedged. Abigail wasn't there to rescue him.

"I'll stop by all the same. This place is quaint, and I wish I'd discovered it sooner."

Tobias placed a hand on his shoulder, meant as a gesture of comfort or solidarity. Will flinched from it, and as he turned away, he saw Hannibal in the doorway, watching.

"Have a good day," he said to Tobias, staring at Hannibal.

“I think I know why the Chesapeake Ripper is after you, Will,” Tobias said, ignoring the polite dismissal.

“I leave that to the FBI to figure out.” Will felt his face flush, and he looked to the tile beside Tobias’ shoe.

“I think he sees such resilient resistances that you have, and he wants to break them,” he continued, either not hearing Will or ignoring him. He looked over to Hannibal who walked over to them casually, and he smiled. “Don’t you think so, Dr. Lecter? There’s something so humanely satisfying about shattering the unbreakable.”

“I rather prefer the Japanese method of kintsugi; the art of using gold lacquer to fortify and strengthen the pottery to make it like new after a break,” Hannibal replied. He sat down at Tobias’ table, unheeding of the dirty plates and glasses.

“Good to see you,” Tobias said with a smile.

“And you,” Hannibal agreed.

Tobias left, and Will busied himself with clearing the table, heat spreading from his ears to his neck. When he reached across to grab the wine glasses, Hannibal slid his fingers along Will’s inner wrist.

“An elevated pulse,” he noted. “Is that excitement or fear I smell, Will?”

“Unease.”

“Guilty?”

“Uncomfortable.”

Hannibal hmm’d thoughtfully, stroking his wrist lightly before letting him go.

“He just started showing up after the ballet,” Will continued, standing straight. His skin tingled. “I don’t know why.”

“Perhaps he looks to replace me,” Hannibal mused. The spark of possessiveness flickered across his face, then was gone.

“He can try,” Will retorted derisively.

“Are you so confidant in us with our non-labels?” Hannibal asked, amused.

“At the very least, myself,” Will said, turning away to take the dishes to the back. He didn’t miss the expression of utmost delight on Hannibal’s face.

Chapter End Notes

So it's looking like this guy will be done around about 19 chapters --unless you guys want a prologue of sorts, which would move it to 20 chapters. I think I have everything necessary outlined, and it's moving along nicely, I think! As always, you guys are honestly the best and I appreciate how kind and lovely you've been with my writing and shenanigans.

I was rocking out to some good old Florence and the Machine for this chapter, as a side note.

Chianti

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 13: Chianti

Dear Will,

You dreamt of me the other night. You woke panting, and I'd have presumed it be your current lover had you not looked so utterly afraid. Did you dream of my hands on your skin, bare and hot with desire? Did you taste the flower petals I lay at your door and stun yourself with the honest, carnal want?

You pressed your fist to your mouth, rolled over and silently wept. Scared of your own desires. I comforted myself with sounds you'd once made when I pressed myself to you, when hips met hips and lips dared share a kiss. You may recoil at the thought, but there is some aspect of you that craves me. Some part of you that woke you in the silence of your room with your hair wet to your temples.

There are many that would presume you to be stunted emotionally because of your empathy, but we both know this not to be true. The level that you feel is so pronounced, so abstract that it brings out the basest of instincts in you with little to no thought. It wakes you with a hunger. And what do we know of hunger, dear Will?

It needs to be fed.

Yours,

-C.R.

Jack found him after one of his classes with Beverly. He took one look at her, then another; she gave a look back and quirked an eyebrow.

"Agent Crawford, this is Beverly Katz. Beverly, this is Agent Crawford, the guy-"

"The guy who's supposed to be keeping you safe from the Chesapeake Ripper," Beverly cut in. She dragged her gaze over Jack's bulldog frame and pursed her lips. "So far so good, I guess. He's still on the loose, though," she pointed out ruthlessly.

"Can I have a moment with Will?" Jack asked, jaw set. For some odd reason, he wasn't rising to the bait.

"Will?"

"I'll be late to class," he said, and Beverly gave him a hard, pointed stare before she nodded and walked away, giving them space. He pulled out a ziplock baggy of Doritos and

offered a handful to Jack. Some classes made it so that you had to eat between them, otherwise you didn't eat at all.

"I got your voicemail," Jack said, ignoring the offer of processed snacks. "His latest kill was in your forensics class, and he redid his murder of the 'wound man'."

"Where were you?" Will asked him, scuffing his shoe on the concrete. He let his leg swing over a crack. Living dangerously.

"Not at work."

Bags and shadows danced under his eyes. Red rimmed them like a fine-tipped pen.

"You were crying," Will said, peeking at his eyes. He inhaled another handful of chips.

"Will-"

"Is it your wife?" He glanced to his ring finger, boasting a modest gold band.

"That's not-"

"You once barged into my apartment and accused me of fucking the Chesapeake Ripper," Will reminded him.

"Cancer," Jack ground out, glaring.

"…I'm sorry," he said, and his hands clamped around his bag of Doritos, breaking them.

"You said you think you did something to upset him," Jack said, ignoring his poor attempt at condolences. Condolences were often like that, no matter how sincerely said. How did one comfort the dying? How did one comfort the one trapped watching them die? Will dazedly thought, *love is watching someone die.*

"He knows I'm…seeing Hannibal," he said slowly. He preferred the Chesapeake Ripper over cancer. At least he could *try* to fight back against the Ripper.

"So he's jealous. He wants you to see that he's jealous?"

"There's another man that's showing up at my place of work, asking questions about the Ripper…I think he either has a death wish, or he knows something we don't know."

"What's his name?" Jack frowned, lips pursed over clenched teeth. Will dropped a handful of broken chips into his mouth.

"Tobias Budge," he said after chewing. "The one I called you about."

"I'll look into it," Jack promised. "Are there more notes? More poems?"

Will knew that he should say something about the last one, but he couldn't bring himself to. There was an intimacy about the details the Ripper had written, a teasing elegance as he made it quite clear how easy it'd be to *tell everyone* what he'd done to Will. After his knock about accusations of fucking the Ripper, how was he supposed to then tell Jack that he was having wet dreams about him, and the Ripper knew about it?

Are they only a distraction because I have not been forthcoming enough?

"No." He took another handful of chips and all but inhaled them so his face didn't give away the lie.

"Just call if he does. I'm going to get the motion put through to have you in a safe house until we can get this under control."

"You know what he'd do if I suddenly disappeared," Will warned him. "I said it before, the last time you suggested it." Jack's tense expression said what his words didn't –he most certainly knew.

He finished his chips and pulled out his sandwich, loitering outside of the building where his lecture was. Jack stared up at the sky, giving him a chance to get a few good bites in.

"Maybe putting you in a safe house would be a good way to lure him out, though," he said at last. Will's jaw furiously worked, his frown at Jack impressive.

"You want to make me bait?" he asked around his food. He swallowed with difficulty.

"You'd be the best sort of bait for the Chesapeake Ripper."

"He wouldn't try and follow me, he'd just kill people until you gave me back." He took another bite and scowled. "Like a tantrum," he added.

"He'd make mistakes in his anger, though," said Jack.

"You want to hike up the body count because you could maybe catch him? Is that what they're teaching at the FBI?" Will asked. He nudged the pickle back into his sandwich before it could fall to the ground.

"Will-"

"Even if he did make a mistake, it'd take a few before you caught it. So is my disappearing and a bloodbath happening in the aftermath worth catching him? Is that how you're going to explain it to the grieving widows?"

He took another pointed bite, blood rushing in his ears with a hollow sort of drumming.

"We have to stop him somehow, and even with these letters we aren't getting any closer," Jack growled. Will tried to speak, then stopped. He swallowed his mouthful of food with difficulty

“Do you think catching him before your wife dies is going to somehow make it easier in the aftermath?” he asked coldly. “When you’re alone, you can comfort yourself knowing that at least you’re not the only one grieving? At least you got him in the end?”

“I didn’t hear you say that.” Jack’s voice lowered to a warning rumble as he rounded on Will.

“…You didn’t.” Will nodded and looked down, finishing off the sandwich. The silence between them was serrated, enough to cut, enough to wound. He brushed bread crumbs from his flannel, stuffed the ziplock bag into his back pack. Fear made him rude.

“Call me if something comes up,” Jack said at last, and Will had to applaud his self-control as he turned and walked away. If he’d hit Will, Will figured he’d have deserved it.

He barely made it to class, sliding into the seat beside Beverly as the doors closed. She gave him a pointed, curious look, but he ignored it in favor of pinning his stare just to the left of the professor, allowing the lecture to wash over him. Maybe if he tried hard enough, the class would help him forget how amusing the Chesapeake Ripper found it that he’d invaded his subconscious thoughts.

What do we know of hunger, dear Will?

It needs to be fed.

-

The next letter was different.

He opened the door to three large bouquets of roses, the letter tucked discreetly into one. Will carried them one-by-one to the table, stupefied, and he idly thumbed one of the petals as he opened the letter.

Dear Will,

I am in need of music that would flow
Over my fretful, feeling fingertips,
Over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips,
With melody, deep, clear, and liquid-slow.
Oh, for the healing swaying, old and low,
Of some song sung to rest the tired dead,
A song to fall like water on my head,
And over quivering limbs, dream flushed to glow!

There is a magic made by melody:
A spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool
Heart, that sinks through fading colors deep
To the subaqueous stillness of the sea,
And floats forever in a moon-green pool,
Held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep.

The perfect pitch of music, I think, would be the sounds of you screaming.

Yours,

-C.R.

Will called Jack, heart pounding.

"Another one," he said, pacing. He drummed fingers on his leg, and he slapped it when he realized the action. "Another one, and I think it's bad."

It was.

Steven Borneholdt sat in his usual chair at the Baltimore Symphony, but he would never play the cello again –not now that he was the cello. Will stared at the body, draped and reeking of odd chemicals, and he gripped the letter tightly in his hand. He wasn't embarrassed to admit the trembling of his bones, the twitches of his muscles that begged him to run and run far.

"The perfect pitch of music would be the sounds of you screaming," Jack murmured, crouching down to inspect the body.

"Well, if we dragged a bow across his vocal cords, he'd probably sound like he's screaming," Price commented. Will flinched.

"What do you see, Will?" Jack asked.

"…I don't know," Will said.

"You don't know?"

"I don't know. Things were fine, they were…this doesn't feel right." Will inched closer, forcing himself to look at the neck of a cello forced through the mouth and down the exposed throat. "I'm…seeing what should be the Chesapeake Ripper, but I'm not hearing him."

"What do you hear?"

"I hear…a deep note. Mellow, reaching…" Will gestured towards his neck, and he rubbed the back of it roughly. "It's a serenade."

"He is serenading you with this, then?"

"I don't think this is about me, Jack."

"Then why send you the note and three vases of flowers?"

“You know, all those flowers and not a single print,” Price bemoaned, disgruntled. “Water samples may give us an indication, but if that indication’s DC…well…” He gestured wildly.

“I don’t hear the Chesapeake Ripper…I hear someone calling out to him. I hear this as…a call to him. A song for him.”

“You think someone’s noticed his work and wants to replicate it?” Jack shook his head, standing up from beside the body. “I don’t see that. It looks like he’s escalating. Whatever you did since the last body, he’s decided that he’s done.”

“It doesn’t feel right,” Will murmured. “It’s breaking his pattern of three.”

“You said, ‘why not three?’ to me just little while ago,” Jack reminded him.

“I *know*,” Will snapped, pressing his palms to his eyes. “I…what’d…he take this time?”

“His entire run of intestines are missing,” Price replied cheerfully. “Is he making sausage?”

“I didn’t want to hear that,” Jack murmured.

“Did you make sure Tobias Budge is okay?” Will asked.

“We checked up on him, and he assured us that he was perfectly alright,” he replied.

Will stared at the body, and he politely disagreed.

-

Tobias owned a shop called Chordophone, and it sold violins, cellos, and many other manner of stringed instruments. Will stepped in and inhaled the taste of wood polish, dust, and chemicals. Above him, the bell on the door betrayed him.

“Will,” Tobias said, rounding the corner. He paused mid-stride, head tilted. “What a surprise.”

Will was happy to be the one surprising people for once.

“I was in the area,” he said, gesturing behind him.

“Are you often in the Baltimore area?” Tobias asked. Will didn’t feel that it was right to remind him that he often drove at least two hours round-trip just to visit Will and drink wine in DC –the trick about lying was that you had to remain perfectly calm and amicable.

“When the Chesapeake Ripper kills here, yes,” Will said. “He…said he wanted to play me like a violin. He already did with someone else.”

“How awful,” Tobias said, not sounding awful at all.

“Yeah,” Will agreed, looking at the violins. He walked over and brushed his fingers against one lightly. “The more I thought about it, though, I found it off.”

“Off?” Tobias’ eyebrows lifted.

“You said he was interested in me because I didn’t seem as though I’d break. I think, though…he’s losing interest, maybe. He sent me violin strings, he’s mentioned you several times, and now with the body…I think maybe he wants you, instead.”

“…That must be some measure of relief for you, that he is shifting his focus away." Tobias tried very, very hard to sound sympathetic. It was about as unconvincing as Will thought it’d be when he’d first ran the potential for their conversation through his head. Jack didn’t know he was there, so he had to be careful, cautious.

“I’m worried about it, though. Does that mean he’s going to kill me? Does that mean I’ve put you in danger?”

“The FBI has already assured me that they’re going to do their best to keep me safe,” Tobias assured him.

“I’m worried about you.”

“You’re kind to worry,” Tobias replied. “But if I also inform local authorities, I’m sure they’ll do their part.”

Will was about to inform him of how silly that was, seeing as how the Chesapeake Ripper had managed many times to slip in and out of plenty of public places undetected, but he was distracted by a long bundle of familiar, bleached white string.

“What’s this?” he asked, fingering it.

“Oh, that?” Tobias picked it up and gripped the bundle idly. “It’s cat gut. Unlike steel or polymer, it creates a perfect pitch and sound to the instrument. I recommend it to all of my students.”

“Cat gut,” Will repeated.

“Yes, imported from Italy. The Baltimore Symphony orders directly through me.”

“I didn’t know they used cat guts on stringed instruments,” Will said dazedly. His heart throbbed irregularly, and he wondered just what would happen when one day it decided to stop. At least it’d be his fault instead of the Chesapeake Ripper’s. He should have seen a doctor.

“What else would they have used before string and polymer, Will?” Tobias asked with a laugh.

Will didn’t know, and he mumbled something much along those lines. After he left, his fat fingers fumbled for Jack’s number.

“Will,” Jack greeted. The sound of multiple voices in the background almost drowned him out.

“The Chesapeake Ripper was in Tobias Budge’s shop and stole cat gut string to prove it to me.”

“I know; we spoke with Mr. Budge, and-”

“Then I thought, ‘why a cat?’”

“…I’m not following,” Jack said heavily.

“Why a cat’s guts, Jack? Why not person guts?”

“You think he took his intestines to make strings?” Jack clarified. He didn’t sound opposed, merely…resigned. It wasn’t that far of a stretch.

“Maybe. I think…maybe he’s looking at Tobias now because Tobias was looking at me.”

And Tobias is only looking at me because he wants to look at the Chesapeake Ripper.

When Jack hung up, Will sat in the driver’s seat of his clunky old Subaru, only mildly pleased with the series of events. Jack would try harder to protect Tobias, and maybe that would give him the insight to see just what sort of person made the strings of a violin out of the guts of a man.

The letter bothered him.

It was a thorn that got too deep under the skin to pull out, so it festered. It was the open wound in his mouth that he kept tonguing over, willing it to heal right so he could stop thinking about it.

The poetry was right, the rhythm and rhyme of it ringing true. The tone was off, though, and the oils from his fingers discolored the sides from his gripping too hard. How had he, in a matter of a mere week or so, gone from teasing and mocking him at the state of his dreams, to wondering the pitch of his scream? Nothing large had changed in his world, and he dragged his thumb over his lips, mulling over the feel of three vases of roses. His guts panged with hunger.

And what do we know of hunger, Will? It needs to be fed.

He called Hannibal because he was already in Baltimore, and he wanted to see him.

“Will,” Hannibal said, distracted.

“There’s another body. This one’s in Baltimore.”

“Are you here?” Pots and pans struck together in the background. Will absently bit his thumb.

“Towards the center of town. Do you want to grab drinks?”

“I’m preparing dinner for tonight, otherwise I would.” It was the first ‘no’ Will had ever received from Hannibal. He paused over it, puzzled.

“Do you want to eat together tonight?” he asked, cautious.

“I’m actually having Tobias over for dinner tonight,” Hannibal said with ease, like they were discussing the weather. Will bit down on his thumb so hard that he snatched it from his mouth and winced, shaking his hand.

“…What?”

“I’m having Tobias over for dinner,” Hannibal repeated.

“Oh.”

“Is everything alright?” Hannibal asked.

“Yeah, I just…” He just? He stared unseeing out of the window of the Subaru, and he swallowed convulsively, adam’s apple bobbing. “I just need to head back to DC.”

“I thought it right to tell you,” Hannibal said, and maybe he sensed the way that Will’s breath came short, even though he held the phone away from his mouth so that it didn’t betray him.

“No, it’s fine; that’s fine,” Will said when he could manage to sound completely normal. “I’ve just had a long day.”

When the call ended, he sat in the car with the engine off, staring at nothing in particular as he thought. He thought about the body that didn’t quite fit, square peg in round hole, and he thought of the blunt, vulgar writing in the latest note. Mostly, he thought about how dumb he was, and how he’d been so entirely confidant in telling Hannibal that Tobias couldn’t sway him that he’d never thought to clarify in return if Hannibal felt the same.

He laid his head on the steering wheel, and he stayed like that for a long time.

When he got back to his apartment, he stared at the three vases of roses, left by a dismal Price who’d said there was nothing for him to use from them, apart from water samples. He thought of square pegs and round holes. He thought of hands that stilled tapping fingers, of the way Hannibal moaned his name when he found just the right spot. Calmly, almost mechanically, he picked up one of the vases and hurled it at the wall, watching dispassionately as it shattered glass and water every which way. The roses flew high into the air, arcing over one another, and they hit the floor with soft, muted thuds. Will poured himself a glass of whiskey and left them there.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of your support!

To be honest, the inspiration for this entire chapter really came down to the scene I did where Will is just laying his head on the steering wheel, phone in hand after hanging up on Hannibal. Like...I just can't get that image out of my head. The rest kind of built around that and what/how that would even end up, and I just...yeah. Anyway.

Never let it be said writers have it all together, though. I totally woke up at 3 AM today and rewrote a scene that was bugging me, and I didn't get back to sleep until about 7...I work at 10. So if there's any mistakes, my apologies! I'm hitting the coffee hard today...

Dolcetto

Chapter Notes

> Trigger Warning: This chapter contains questionable consent regarding alcohol. In no way is drunk consent actual consent, and I hope to have handled the situation with respect due such a situation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14: Dolcetto

He didn't see Hannibal for a week.

He didn't see Tobias Budge, either.

He told himself it was fine; no labels meant freedom, an easy exit in case things became too complicated or too serious for him. No labels meant he was free to fly on the whims of whatever provocation struck him in the moment. He changed his aftershave back to the one with the ship on the bottle.

He was kindly but firmly let go at Nectar.

"I've gotten a couple of customer complaints. Your head's just not in the game, Will, and I can't have that here. You're a great guy, but one of those complaints was on Yelp, and we're family owned. We can't take a hit like that. We can't afford it."

"Okay."

"I'll give you a fair reference; feel free to put me down, and I'll see to it that you get the job."

"…Okay."

He considered calling Hannibal to tell him, but at the last moment, finger poised over the send button, he changed his mind.

-

"What's got you meeting us in a public place like this so early in the afternoon?" Beverly asked, sipping her drink. Fridays meant half price Long Island Iced Teas, and Will was kind enough to buy one for each of them. Hannibal had been making so much food for him that he'd ended up saving on groceries, leaving a little wriggle room for alcohol meant to numb and stifle emotions.

“Just needed some time away from work and school,” he said.

“I heard you were fired,” Margot drawled, spinning on the stool. Will shot her an unforgiving look.

“People don’t like the Chesapeake Ripper’s target working for them. It makes them nervous,” he informed a sympathetic Alana. He took a sip of the drink, pleased with the way it settled hot in his stomach. He wasn’t in the mood to be sober.

“What’s Hannibal going to do?” Beverly asked. Alana glanced over at them, curious.

“Who’s Hannibal?”

“A fuck buddy?” Margot guessed.

“I think he’s seeing someone else,” he told Beverly. Beverly hmm’d and scowled, taking a long, exaggerated drink from the two straws.

“If he is, drop him,” she declared.

“I think he’s already dropped me.”

“Was he a boyfriend?” Alana asked kindly.

“No labels,” he muttered, taking another drink.

“People say that as an excuse to fuck around,” Margot said, arching her brow. “No labels means no breakup, so if you make a scene, you’re the one that people talk about, not them.”

“It’s fine,” said Will, and Beverly snorted.

“Like hell it’s fine. Bartender?” She waved at the man on the end. “I think we’re going to need another round. I don’t want this fish trying to come up for air.”

Will was too miserable to even think about arguing.

It wasn’t the third long island that got him, nor was it the fourth. By the fifth, half of the bar knew Will had been ‘cheated on’ and were more than happy to buy their small group drinks, declaring themselves the new best friends of Will Graham, that guy that sounded like the one in the article about serial killers, but no one could really remember the details. Alcohol made it fuzzy, made redirecting people as easy as pie.

Will found himself decidedly not missing anyone or anything. No, no, that was a lie; he missed the feel of his lips. They tingled, numb, and he touched them, staring stupidly at the wild debate that Margot, Alana, and someone else at the bar were elbows deep into.

“You’d never know Alana was a debater until a moment like this,” Beverly said with a hiccup.

“She’s always been a debater,” Will said, but it came out slurred, words blending and blurring like paint on canvas. He swayed on his stool, a dull hum in his veins that made everything soft.

“Are you thinking about Hannibal?” Beverly asked.

“No,” he said honestly. “I was thinking that I’m too drunk to remember what you just asked me.”

Beverly laughed, then Will laughed, and it was loud enough to get the attention of Alana, who gave up the debate in order to laugh with them, as well as catch Will as he decided to take a tumble from the bar stool.

They split a taxi fare home, and Margot, surprisingly the least drunk of them all, made sure Will got to his apartment before she toddled back to the taxi, swinging her hips and flailing her heels in hand to the beat of a song playing on her phone. Beverly and Alana cheered her on from the taxi. Will leaned against the door to his apartment on the second floor, breathing in the sharp, frigid air, and he debated sleeping outside. It was nice. Nature was nice.

Lack of a pillow ultimately led him inside where he tossed his keys somewhere in the gloom. They hit the ground with a loud, jangling clatter, and the noise distracted him just enough that he turned to it rather than turn to flip on the lights. Which was just as well; as he turned, he stumbled, and as he stumbled he fell right into the arms of the Chesapeake Ripper.

It was the hat silhouette that gave him away; it was the same as the time the Ripper had straddled him on his bed. Will fell against him, surprised, hands flying up to grab his arms to steady himself as his equilibrium swayed, threatening to spill his stomach’s contents all over the floor. At his frantic, tight grip, the Ripper grabbed his upper arms, steadying him. He let out a short hiss of breath.

“There you are,” Will slurred, and he fell into him, pressing his face to his chest. He turned his head, ear pressed to his heartbeat. It pounded, far less calm than it’d been before, his body tense around Will, waiting. Waiting for what? Will closed his eyes; at the dizzying array in his head, he opened them.

“I thought…he’s gone from me. I wasn’t enough, and he’s gone. Are you here to finally kill me? Is that why you’re waiting in my apartment?”

The Chesapeake Ripper shook his head, sliding his hands from Will’s shoulders in order to wrap his arms around him tightly, securing him in place.

“That’s a fucking relief,” he murmured into his chest. In the dark, he could only see the shape of his arm, made lumpy by the sweatshirt he wore. It smelled of grass clippings and secrets. He inhaled the taste, and it made his head spin, so much so that he tried to straighten up, blinking rapidly.

“I’m drunk,” he confessed, and the Ripper tightened his hold on him. “It’s nice.”

He laid his head on his shoulder, since that's what felt appropriate while being embraced by a serial killer.

"I thought you left me. I thought you left like Tobias left, taking Hannibal with him, and you followed along, too." The Ripper's hand lifted to the back of his head where he stroked the curls lightly, soothingly. Will leaned into his touch, material bunching in his grasp as he held on for dear life.

"Did you send me that letter?" he whispered, and the Ripper stilled. "Did you send me that letter where you mentioned the perfect pitch being my screams?"

A beat. The Ripper shook his head.

"Did you kill the musician in Baltimore?"

He shook his head again.

"Did Tobias Budge kill the musician in Baltimore?"

A prolonged hesitation. Will swallowed down the awful taste of too many liquors blended together, and the Chesapeake Ripper nodded.

"Did he send me those flowers in the vases?"

Another nod.

"I didn't think he was the Chesapeake Ripper. I'm relieved," he said, and he blinked rapidly, eyelids heavy. "I'm tired."

The Chesapeake Ripper walked him down the hall in the dark, like he'd done this a thousand times before. Minus carrying half of Will's body-weight, it was very likely he had. He didn't turn on the light in the bedroom, but he helped Will ease down onto the edge of the bed, smoothing hair away from his brow once he was settled.

"I'm tired," he said again, and the Ripper slid his hands down to cradle his face, tilting Will's head back. Will blinked hazily at the shadows before him, too drunk to focus well enough to try and see what few features he could maybe make out in the dark. "I'm tired in my head, in my skin, in my bones. Everything's escalating, and I don't know what's going to happen to me."

The Chesapeake Ripper hmm'd, stroking his thumb along his cheek.

"I know that Tobias is dangerous. His eyes are dead. He came to me to get to you, and I think he thinks this town isn't big enough for two serial killers."

A subtle nod. The Ripper agreed.

"He should just die," Will decided quietly. He hiccupped again. "If the choice was between you or him, I'd choose you every time."

A soft huff of laughter, a mere whisper in the quiet.

"Isn't that awful, though? You're a murderer. You eat people. I should…I shouldn't want you this much. I shouldn't be that upset when you're not here. I shouldn't *want* you."

One hand slid down to Will's neck, cupping his pulse. It beat steadily against his palm.

"…But I do."

His hand tightened on his neck reflexively. It loosened when Will hiccupped again.

"What is it you said to me? 'I long for the day you *ache* for me'?" At another nod, Will laughed, a blurred, miserable one. "…I'm hungry. I have a hunger for you."

The Chesapeake Ripper's breath caught, the only sound in the room apart from the blood roaring in Will's ears. He swallowed, his throat decidedly dry. His tongue clicked on the roof of his mouth.

"…And what do we know of hunger?" Will asked. He leaned into the Ripper's touch.

He suddenly found himself pressed back onto the bed, hands pinned to the mattress above his head.

"It needs to be fed," The Chesapeake Ripper growled.

-

He woke up with just enough time to run to the bathroom where he vomited profusely. The world swayed left, right, and Will's head bobbed with it. He groaned, somehow still drunk despite the time of day, and when he lifted his head, he stared at the toilet seat that sat with quiet indignity at his behavior.

The night before was a blur.

He propped himself up and took short, curt breaths until his stomach settled. Once he felt that he could stand without barfing again, he stood up and rinsed his mouth, grabbing his toothbrush and attacking his teeth with it, a shudder running down his spine at the foul taste in the back of his throat.

He grabbed his trash can and hauled it after him as he stumbled into the front room and stared dazedly, trying to get his bearings. The room was clean, spotless, and it took him a prolonged moment to realize that the shattered glass and roses that he'd left on the floor for the past week were gone, no indication of their having ever existed. Had he decided to clean the night before? He slumped into a dining room chair and sat the trash can beside him, squinting at the space where the other two vases once dominated the table. Had he thrown them away? When he tried to recall, he had to place his face in his hands to stop the lurching sensation that made water pool on his tongue.

He couldn't remember.

He checked his phone and pulled up the text from Beverly, squinting at it.

B: How you feeling, champ?

He uttered a short, foul curse and scowled down at his phone.

W: I don't remember what happened last night.

B: Me neither. We were pretty hammered. Alana said Margot had to convince you not to sleep out on the porch.

He snorted. Margot must have pitied him to deny him the opportunity to make an ass of himself.

W: I cleaned the house, apparently.

B: If you managed to clean it without breaking anything, good job. I've been puking since seven A.M.

W: Just woke up.

B: Lucky bastard.

He sat the phone down and rubbed his face, cursing the taste of the long island iced tea. Never in the history of drinking had anyone ever mixed that many liquors into one drink and lived to speak happily about it.

He went into the kitchenette and flipped on the light, fingers hovering over the switch as he noticed a pan sitting out on the stove that he most certainly didn't recall putting there. He lifted the lid, still warm against his palm, and his heart dropped to his guts as he gaped at steam rising from a breakfast omelet that'd recently been made.

Definitely not him. Will stared at the peppers mixed into the egg, a voice whispering in the back of his head that he had no such peppers in his fridge.

In his rush to throw open his apartment door, he had to lean against it and take deep, steady breaths as he almost vomited again. When he managed to open it a crack, he used his foot to drag the letter inside, not wanting to bend over and fall onto his face. Door closed and securely locked, he slumped to the floor and picked up the letter, his pulse hammering into his neck mercilessly.

Dearest Will,

If you truly wish for me to kill Tobias Budge for you, you only have to ask.

Always yours,

-C.R.

The Chesapeake Ripper was in his house last night. He'd made him breakfast.

Hoarse panting, bedsprings creaking, hands that encase and ensnare, cheek pressed to hot cheek.

"My darling Will," a rough, grating voice whispering praises in his ear, making his blood sing. "My darling Will."

Will dropped the letter and pressed his hand to his mouth, shaking his head frantically. That hadn't happened. *That hadn't happened.*

He barely made it to the bathroom before he threw up again.

-

Hannibal called a few hours later, and Will considered letting it go to voicemail. He stared at the buzzing phone, swallowed the taste of bile, and picked up.

"Hello?"

"Will," Hannibal said warmly. Like he hadn't ignored him for over a week. "Do you work today?"

"I was fired."

"…I see. That is regrettable."

There was a lull, Will staring blankly at the floor, trying to puzzle out the night before, two fingers of whiskey in the glass at his elbow. The best cure for a hangover was more alcohol. The best cure to get the flashes of memory out of his head was more alcohol. Ergo, he needed to drink.

"Would you like some company?" Hannibal asked, and there was a touch of hesitation. If Will didn't know better, he'd have guessed Hannibal knew just how deeply he'd hurt him. Maybe he knew what 'no labels' meant to someone like Will, and that there'd been a line somewhere that'd been crossed. It was up for interpretation. Maybe he thought Will was pissed. Maybe he just felt bad he wasn't there to witness Will get booted from another job. The headache kicking at his temple wasn't really an ally in reading tone of voice over the phone. The flashes of memory that danced along his eyelids every time he blinked wasn't helping with the nausea.

He thumbed the edge of the envelope from the Ripper, and he sighed.

"I don't think I'd be that good of company." Among other things.

"Why not?"

"I'm hungover."

"A long night, Will?" There was a gentle nudge of humor, testing the waters.

"It all pretty much came back up," Will informed him.

“You’re unwell? Allow me to bring you food.”

“I can’t promise that I’ll eat it,” Will said. He wasn’t quite sure how the word ‘no’ would sound coming out of his mouth. He practiced it silently, and the shape of his lips just wasn’t right. He considered trying anyway, just to see how Hannibal would react.

“At the very least, I can ensure you’re alright.”

“…Alright.”

He made the drive in almost half the time.

Will answered the door, clad in his pajama pants and a loose tee, uncaring of his bedhead or what probably had to be half a week’s worth of unshaved face. Hannibal’s eyes swept from head to toe, and he stepped in, two small bowls in hand.

“You do look unwell,” he said, setting the bowls down in the kitchen. Will grunted.

“I drank a lot,” he said, closing and locking the door.

“Beverly’s idea?” he asked.

“Mine. She didn’t try and discourage it, though.”

“I wouldn’t imagine she would.”

He watched Hannibal move about the kitchen with poise and ease, finding spoons without having to ask which drawer they were in. He’d cooked at Will’s house for the past few months almost as much as he had at his own.

“This is a silkie soup to aid in replenishing what was lost during your stomach’s upheaval,” he explained, presenting a bowl to Will. He accepted the spoon and set it in the bowl.

“That’s a nice way of saying I puked up anything of value from yesterday.”

“In all things, I try and maintain some level of dignity,” Hannibal replied with a small smile.

“Can’t say the same for myself,” Will replied. “Last night was a pretty damn good indication of that.”

“I’m glad you were able to make yourself breakfast,” Hannibal said, nodding to the half-eaten omelet at the table.

Will avoided looking at the food. He’d choked it down out of necessity, not want.

It was not a want but a need, and Will thrust into him, palm pressed to palm in holy palmer’s kiss, and the noises that fell around them made his heart pound, made his veins burn as his hips moved hungrily.

“Thanks,” he said after a moment, motioning to the soup. He took a sip, testing his stomach in the face of the broth. It was rich, still warm despite the trip in the car, and he nodded, scooping up a mushroom.

“Was it the sort of relief you were going for?” Hannibal asked. Will didn’t have to question what he was talking about.

“I didn’t plan on getting that drunk. Just enough to relax.”

“Do you remember if it worked?”

Teeth grazed over his inner thigh, and Will cried out, hips bucking up. Hands pressed him back down to the bed, teasing, caressing. When lips wrapped around his member and hands glided along his skin, he gripped the sheets beneath his hands and shuddered, sparks of pleasure arcing along his nerves.

“Yes, yes,” he moaned.

“…No.”

His skin tasted like salt and blood. Will traced his lips and tongue over his ribs, biting down when gloved hands tugged his hair.

“Take your gloves off and touch me,” he said. The Chesapeake Ripper complied.

“I hope nothing untoward happened,” Hannibal said. His soup sat untouched, and he studied Will with a hesitance that, if Will hadn’t known him well enough, he wouldn’t have noticed.

“We got a cab back here, my friends went home, and I was here the rest of the night. I don’t think they’d have let anything happen to me.”

“That is a relief.”

Once Will got about half of it down, Hannibal began eating as well, like he had to make sure Will could stomach it before it was worth it. His eyes occasionally drifted towards the half empty plate though, and Will traced his movements, fingers drumming on his leg idly.

Afterwards, Hannibal cleaned up and sat beside him on the couch, leg crossed and hands clasped in his lap like a gentleman. Will slumped into the seat of the couch, willing himself to melt into it.

“You changed your aftershave back,” Hannibal noted.

“…Yeah.”

“Were you jealous that I had dinner with Tobias?” Hannibal asked in the bleak quiet.

“You can have dinner with whoever you want,” Will replied after a moment, fiddling with the string on his pajama pants.

“He was restringing my harpsichord. Since he was more than willing to come to me, I thought to give him something in return.”

“You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“I’m giving you one all the same,” said Hannibal, and he reached over to grasp Will’s hand.

Their hands were intertwined, their breaths wrapped up in one another, and Will held him pinned to the bed, thighs tight around his middle as he kissed him like a drowning man breaking the surface of the sea just before death. His lips were full, plump from the abuse, and Will bit down on his bottom lip, hard.

“…Do what you want, Hannibal,” Will finally said. He didn’t pull his hand away, but he didn’t return the light pressure, either. He needed a shower. He needed to scrub his skin raw.

“Your tactics of evasion may work with your friends, but they won’t work on me, Will,” Hannibal informed him gravely. “You tell me to do what I want, and what I want is to spend my time with you. That desire is meaningless, though, if you don’t want it, too.”

“…I’m tired,” Will said heavily.

“*I’m tired.”*

“Of me?” Hannibal wondered. Will shook his head, letting go of Hannibal’s hand to rub his face roughly, palms pressed to his eyes.

“I told you that I wasn’t going to be good company,” he muttered.

“Are you still hungry?”

“*I have a hunger.”*

“No, I’ve been fed.” He motioned back towards the clean and empty bowls on the table. “I think I just want to lay down.”

“Would you like company for that?” Hannibal asked. Will stood, and he felt Hannibal’s eyes track his movement, his stretching. Wordlessly, he grabbed Hannibal’s hand and tugged him up, leading him down the hall to the bedroom where he crawled beneath the blankets and curled up close to him, legs intertwined.

He tried very hard to ignore the bitter scent of stale sex in the room. Hannibal ignored it, too.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of your love and support in my writing! This will be my last chapter update for at least a week or so until I can get settled at my new place! Again, thank you for your understanding and patience! :)

Old Fashioned

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 15: Old Fashioned

Abigail found him on campus that Monday, perusing help wanted ads pinned to one of the community boards.

"Hey," she said, shifting from one foot to the other. Will pulled a phone number tab from one of the papers with a little too much force.

"Was it Tobias Budge that complained about me?" he asked.

"…Yeah." She made a face, and they walked along the sidewalk, shoulders occasionally bumping with uneven steps. Somehow, he didn't mind it. "He made a huge deal about being charged wrong, you using foul language whenever he came in, and things like that. Even when I said it was a lie, she got a hold of that Freddie Lounds article and it was all downhill from there."

"I'm giving up bartending."

"Your dream?" she asked, brows lifted in mock surprise.

"I'll make a new dream…dog walking." He held up the scrap of paper to show her.

"You need a bachelor's degree for dog walking."

"…Then I'll make a newer dream." He snorted and tucked the paper into his pocket for later. When they reached one of the coffee shops on campus, he grabbed drinks for the two of them and sat down, staring off towards the crowds of students going to and from class.

"How are you doing?" Abigail asked.

Will opened his mouth to tell her that he was fine, just *fine*, but his eyes fell to the chiffon scarf tied into a bow at her neck. His mouth fumbled with the words, discarded them. She was the only one who could possibly know what he was going through.

"I'm…wrestling with a moral dilemma," he admitted. He turned the iced coffee about in his hands, thumb wiping away a streak of condensation on it.

"About the Chesapeake Ripper?"

"About a lot of things, but him too." Tobias Budge. The Ripper's note. The fact that Will had sex with the Chesapeake Ripper. Just thinking it sent tendrils of chills down his back.

If you truly wish for me to kill Tobias Budge for you, you only have to ask.

"Are they any closer to finding him?" Abigail asked.

"No." He took a sip of coffee and laughed bitterly. "The body count is rising, too," he added.

"That's not your fault."

"…What if it was?" Will asked. "What if…you were upset with someone, and your father had offered to kill them for you. Would that be your fault? Or would it have been his?"

"He killed a store manager once because I'd mentioned him leering at me and my friends," Abigail confessed quietly. She watched her coffee much the same way Will did. "When people are sick in the head, they'll make it about you no matter what you do. They'll make you think you put the thoughts in their head, not the other way around."

"You loved him," Will said quietly. "Even when he was like that."

"I loved him, but I was afraid of him," Abigail replied. Her hand passed along the scarf, an unconscious gesture.

They enjoyed their coffee in silence, and when the large clock tower chimed the time she left him to head to her next class, hair cast about wildly in the breeze. Will watched her go, then stared up at the sky, the hint of a forlorn sigh on the tip of his tongue. Only his blunt refusal to be cliché stopped it.

Abigail loved her father, but she'd been afraid of him. Will wasn't afraid *of* the Chesapeake Ripper. He was afraid of *himself*.

If you truly wish for me to kill Tobias Budge for you, you only have to ask.

-

The dog walking gig fell through, but a seedy bar at the edge of the city snapped him up right away. Mingles had a reputation for bikers, a strict code about not cheating at pool, and a perpetually dirty bathroom. The tips were phenomenal, though. Even on training night, Will walked away with a stuffed pocket of cash.

The idea of Hannibal ever showing up to such a place didn't cross his mind. It smelled of sweat, well-whiskey, and the acidic aftermath of vomit. The loudness was brash, moreso for Will, and he found that more often than not he was detaching himself from customers male and female alike that just 'wanted to take him home to mom'.

The noise helped him drown out the thought of asking the Chesapeake Ripper to kill Tobias Budge.

This town isn't big enough for two serial killers.

In reality, he should just call Jack and tell him to look closer at Tobias. How could he explain that, though? There had to be probable cause to go snooping without a warrant, and it's not like Will knew where Tobias kept his human remains. Could they test the strings? Would there be a difference between cat gut strings and human gut strings? Would Tobias Budge walk, and in doing so walk right up to Will and gut him in thanks?

It wasn't lost on him that with all of the surmounting evidence he had on both the Chesapeake Ripper and Tobias budge, he was in no way capable of presenting it to the authorities in a way that wouldn't condemn him, too. That is, if they even believed him.

The bar also distracted him from the random sparks of memory that slid along his mind's eye in a macabre fashion. The sounds he'd made as the Ripper touched him. The sensation of their members rubbing along one another, the way he kissed as though he could inhale the very essence of Will by desire alone. It was not concise, organized memory, but sporadic pieces that he had to stitch together to get the full story. He'd gotten home, drunk, to the Chesapeake Ripper in his house. In his loneliness, in his desperation, he'd –what, asked to fuck him? Begged him?

"*What do we know of hunger?"*

"*It needs to be fed."*

"Why did you change your aftershave back?" Hannibal asked, sliding onto the barstool in front of Will. He looked up, surprised, rag in hand as he attempted to get a particularly vicious lipstick stain off of the rim of a martini glass. Some of the girls sported matte lipstick that boasted at its ability to never come off. He learned the truth of that after a sorority came through and decimated the daqueri glasses with merciless precision.

"…Didn't think you'd notice," he said, setting the glass back down into the water. He'd fight with it later.

"Now that I have?"

"How did you find me here?" Will asked, looking about. It wasn't terribly crowded, a few bikers in a corner and a few fraternity brothers drinking by the dart boards. Hannibal's clean-lined, tweed suit stood out in sharp relief to the dim, dirty backdrop of the bar. He stuck out like a sore thumb, but if he noticed the clash of his presence in the general ambiance, he certainly didn't care.

"Not everyone is as difficult to find as your secret admirer is. Your friend Abigail was more than happy to help me out." A pause as he looked about, eyes maroon underneath the bar lights. "This is far from your normal places of work."

"Well, the 'normal' places are all terrified that I'm going to bring a psychopath in tow that will kill their customers," Will groused, and with nothing on the menu resembling wine, he started making Hannibal an Old Fashioned.

"I suppose, given the assumptions about people that frequent these places, a psychopath is the least of their worries."

“Assumptions?”

“Most of it, I’m convinced, is a societal stereotype. More often than not, the one that appears the least capable of kindness holds it in endless quantities, while the one whose face is a shining pillar to the community keeps the darkest secrets.”

“If you say it a little louder, you’ll make friends with everyone here.”

“I am always searching for new acquaintances.”

He set the drink down for Hannibal, a little harder than intended at his mentioning of new acquaintances, and he accepted it with a nod of thanks. A waitress came back with orders for the men in the corner, and Will busied himself with filling pitchers of beer, pointedly ignoring the way the girl was eyeing Hannibal.

When she left, he looked to Will, taking a sip of his drink. He nodded in appreciation at the taste and set it down lightly.

“Were you going to tell me that you got a new job?”

“I thought about it.”

“I’m relieved to find that I was given some consideration.” He smiled, canines showing.

“…I’m not sorry,” Will said.

“Don’t be,” Hannibal replied pleasantly. “You are your own person, equally capable of making bad decisions just as much as good ones.”

It was a fair sting, and Will nodded, setting clean glasses on the rack to dry.

“In your own way, was changing your aftershave a way to cut some aspect of me out of your life?” The words were accusatory, but Hannibal wielded them with a small, knowing smile. Will shifted from foot to foot, looking out over the room again.

“You didn’t call me, either,” he pointed out after a moment. He didn’t have a serving tray to hide behind like he’d had at Sangre. He didn’t have an Abigail to make him go do inventory like he did at Nectar.

“I didn’t,” Hannibal agreed. “I supposed that you were upset with me, given how our last call had ended.” A pause. “And the one before that.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were,” Hannibal quipped.

“Alright, I was,” Will said. His shoulder jerked into a shrug, and he drummed his fingers idly on the bar.

“Therefore, I thought that space was best for us and our ‘non-label’.”

It didn’t sound so nice that time, when he said it. It sounded dry, an overused word with a meaning Will didn’t even know anymore. Someone walked up to close their tab, and he used that as an excuse to not answer, head ducked as he swiped the card and went through the motions. Hannibal idly sipped his drink.

When he returned, he said, “I think Tobias Budge killed the musician from the Baltimore Symphony in order to try and reach out to the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Whatever Hannibal was expecting, it wasn’t that. His brows lifted, curious, then he smiled slightly and set his drink down.

“It was just dinner, Will,” he said kindly.

“I don’t know if Jack will take me seriously, though,” he said, ignoring the barb. “There’s something…wrong about him. That murder wasn’t the Chesapeake Ripper, although Agent Crawford thinks it is. It was from one killer to another.”

“How could you tell?” Hannibal asked.

“It felt…different. I’ve seen enough of the Chesapeake Ripper’s work to know when it’s not, and this wasn’t it. The intestines were removed, but it was messy, not as meticulous as the Ripper is. No, this…this was…a serenade. He was reaching out to the Ripper.”

“And you think Tobias Budge wants to reach out to the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“Serial killers wouldn’t like sharing, I don’t think,” Will said.

“I don’t imagine so, no,” Hannibal agreed, amused.

“So I think that…unless the Chesapeake Ripper knows, he won’t realize he’s in danger.”

“Does it trouble you to think that he could be killed rather than apprehended by the FBI?” Hannibal asked. “Given how defensive you feel of him?”

“That’s not justice, and it allows another killer to walk free,” Will hedged.

“That’s not truly an answer,” Hannibal murmured, finishing his drink.

“That’s not really a fair question,” Will replied.

Hannibal waited until his shift was over to walk out with him, and when they reached the sidewalk his hand ghosted the small of Will’s back, a light caress that he didn’t want to admit how much he’d missed. The neon lights outside of the bar lit up different angles of Hannibal’s face; his jaw green, his cheek red, the hollows of his eyes blue. They loaded Will’s bike into Hannibal’s vehicle, and they headed back to his apartment.

“Did you change your aftershave because you were intimate with someone else?” Hannibal asked in the car. Will balked at the question.

“What?”

“It’s not an unfair question, Will.”

“…It’s not,” Will agreed. He sighed quietly and propped his head up, staring out of the window. He thought of Beverly’s warnings about dating someone far older than you, how it always ended up ‘messy’. He thought of the way the Ripper’s skin left an aftertaste of copper on his tongue, and how it’d excited him in his drunken state. If it’d been Jack Crawford asking, he’d have immediately jumped to conclusions that would have, for once, been entirely spot on.

“I don’t remember it,” he said slowly, tasting the lie. It was a good one, delivered with as much hesitance and confusion as it deserved. “I don’t even know who it was,” he added.

“Then you’re ashamed of it,” Hannibal noted.

“I guess I’m realizing just what I’m capable of when I feel like I don’t have a lot of control,” he said morosely. Apparently, fucking serial killers was one of those newfound capabilities. He rubbed his forehead, trying to push the images out of his head.

“Was I part of the reason you felt a lack of control?” Hannibal asked.

“I was rude to you,” he said by way of apology.

“Fear makes you rude,” Hannibal reminded him. Will laughed, covering his face with his hand. It did. It really, really did.

“I think I want us to have a label,” Will said, unable to look over at him. He didn’t want to see Hannibal’s face twist, didn’t want to see the inevitable expression of a person that didn’t want the same thing he wanted. “I’m tired of the way we sound without one.”

“What sort of label would you give us, if given the option?” Hannibal asked. His tone revealed nothing.

“I think the kids call it boyfriend, or at the very least, partner,” he replied. His mouth was decidedly dry. “If I butchered that, though, I…understand.”

“Jealousy makes you rude, too,” Hannibal said cheerfully.

“Yeah.” Will nodded and looked out of the window, letting lights blur to streaks in the dark. He thought of lavender on his tongue, and the way Hannibal smiled at him at Sangre, counting the many times he was able to meet his eye. On a particularly good day, five.

Hannibal reached over and took his hand, holding it to stop Will’s damned tapping on his knee. At a red light, he twisted his wrist and lifted Will’s hand up to his mouth, pressing a delicate kiss to his inner palm. Will looked at it, then up at his mouth. His teeth worried over his bottom lip as he watched, waiting. His heart gave an irregular, pointed thump.

"If you change your aftershave back, I think that 'boyfriend' is a label I can certainly live with," he said. When he caught Will's eye, he kissed each one of his fingertips, as delicate as the petals of a flower.

After Hannibal left that night, he tossed the bottle with the ship on it in the trash. He told himself it was because the other one truly did smell better; in reality, he was better at lying to Hannibal about his memories than he was at lying to himself.

-

Dear Will,

Did my last letter trouble you? Is the ease in which I fulfil your every desire something that you shy from out of perceived moral obligation, or is it because you have an instinct to reject aid in any form?

I think I want to meet you, face to face, without the darkness. After the way you placed your hands on me, I think you feel the same.

Yours,

-C.R.

"Hey, Jack…it's Will. I hope your wife is alright. I know you said you'd spoken with Tobias Budge, but I…I really think you should look deeper. There's something about him that I can't see, but I think that when we do, it'll be too late. I don't want anyone to get hurt."

He turned over the flower petals: iris, rose, dianthus, carnations, freesia, amaranth, forget-me-not, and verbena. The same petals as the first letter, the same petals as the bouquet the woman held, clad in her wedding dress. Will thought about what it'd be like to pull back the veil covering the Chesapeake Ripper. He placed the rose petal on his tongue and smiled.

-

It rained the next few days.

Will didn't mind the rain as much as he minded walking home in it. After work, the sheets of water went sideways, and he pulled the strings of his raincoat tightly to keep the hood over his head.

The sound howled in his ears, and he hunkered his shoulders, making a beeline for the overhang of various shops, small landmarks until he could get to a place where a taxi lurked. Honestly, it was worth it to just get an Uber. He hated them, the mundane conversation of the driver, the tense atmosphere of sitting in the back of a car that belonged to someone else. With a twenty minute walk home, though, he'd risk the uncomfortable social obligations of small talk. Hannibal would be proud.

It was at that moment, though, when his thumbs tapped over the screen of his phone to get to the app that a needle punctured into the back of his neck. He wasn't quite sure how he knew it was a needle –it'd been years since his last shot. He figured it was the angle,

coupled with the sensation of something entering his veins, sinking deep as each heartbeat spread it farther, farther. He whirled about, but his feet tripped over one another and he stumbled, arm flying up to grab at the person behind him, trying to find his footing.

He didn't recall hitting the concrete with an unforgiving thud. He didn't even recall the sound of someone soothing the confusion away as he tried to slur what was happening.

All that he heard was the sound of the killer's serenade, the mellow notes of a cello that hungered. Then everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience!! I hope you enjoyed though, and thank you once again for all of your amazing support and kindness :)

Mourvédre

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 16: Mourvédre

Will woke with a start that was hampered by zip-ties that strapped his wrists to the arms of a chair. He looked about, his heartbeat tripping before beginning to quake in his chest, his eyes leaping from his bound wrists to his soaked jeans, then about the room that looked like an unfinished basement with random partitions creating small, shabby corners in the dim light.

Where the hell was he?

He shook his head, more than just confusion creating a haze that left his breath short and his palms clammy. Just seconds ago, he'd been falling –falling where? Why? The rain, the storm, and a needle that punctured deep and sent a sleep through him that knocked what futile defenses he had down with a merciless talent.

He'd been drugged.

"Fuck," he hissed, and he twisted his wrists against the zip-ties, suppressing a grunt of pain at the way they bit into his skin. His legs were similarly bound, and the longer Will looked at his predicament, the more the haze cleared until a senseless, animalistic panic set in. He was going to die. He was going to die in someone's basement, and Jack Crawford wouldn't find him until it was too late.

It was the racket he made as he tried to tear himself free that finally brought his captor down the stairs, although Will didn't know that. The chair lay on its side from his frenzy, Will's head pressed to the cool concrete as he gulped in frantic breaths. He had the dizzying sensation of being lifted, and the chair jerked and slammed to all fours, leaving Will face-to-face with Tobias Budge.

"The man who sold me the anesthesia said patients often wake with no knowledge of time passing," he said with an amiable smile. He brushed dirt from Will's shoulder and arm, dressed like he'd just come from a performance. "Did you experience any time passing, Will? I'm curious."

When his hand moved to adjust Will's shirt, Will wrenched his head down and bit, ripping a chunk of skin from the back of Tobias' hand. He cried out and jerked away from him, the sensation of skin breaking strange on Will's teeth as he pulled his head back and held the flap of flesh like a prize, breathing haggardly against it. When there was enough space between them, Will spat it out on the floor, glaring. He licked the blood from his lips, copper putrid on his tongue.

Tobias stormed over to a small table, hidden by one of the partitions, drops of blood marking his path like a macabre candy trail. The sound of rustling, of quiet hisses of breath filtered over to Will, and he basked in it, gritting his teeth in a feral grin. He wasn't going to die so easily.

"I understand that you're angry, but this truly isn't about you," Tobias said as he returned, finishing wrapping a bandage around the spot. "In the grand scheme of things, you're ultimately nothing."

"The Chesapeake Ripper feels the same way about you," Will said, and his voice wasn't quite his own. There was something harsher, something hungrier in the way he spoke, and he marked Tobias' movements like a cornered animal waiting to lunge.

"He and I have an understanding about one another. We've been playing a good game these past few weeks."

"He told me that if I wanted you to die, I only had to ask."

"Should I feel some semblance of gratitude you didn't ask him to kill me?" Tobias wondered. His flat eyes assessed Will from his bloodstained mouth and chin to his clothes that still dripped rainwater on the floor.

"You should be angry. I'm sure if I asked nicely, he'd have made it painless."

"Does the great Will Graham truly think he holds that much sway over someone with such finesse and talent as the Chesapeake Ripper?"

"You were rude, Tobias. He doesn't like the rude."

"And now I have his favorite toy tied up underneath my shop," Tobias replied pleasantly. "How thankful he'll be to me when I make you into the most beautiful violin, strings and all, and present it to him as a gift. He'll be able to play you whenever he likes."

"I live and die at his convenience, not yours," Will snapped.

"Yes, but when I show him just how well you play, he'll reconsider the advantages of a partner."

They considered one another, Will with blood pooling up around his wrists, Tobias whose blood was already seeping through the bandage. Wounded. Wary.

"He doesn't like sharing," Will whispered.

"Neither do I."

"The difference is that he's far better at his craft than you are. There's no place you can run that he won't find you. When you're smart enough to realize just how angry he's going to be, it'll be too late."

"Are you banking on the Chesapeake Ripper to come and save you, Will?"

“I’m banking on his justice when he sees what you’ve done.”

“You don’t know him like I do,” Tobias murmured, and it was enough to make Will laugh, an ugly, haggard thing that made his ribs press tight against his lungs.

“Tasteless,” he said, and a flicker of fury graced Tobias’ face. Will latched onto it, a starving man placed before a mere morsel. “I saw the body you laid out for him, Tobias. I heard your song every time I closed my eyes. You played your heart out for him, and what did he do? He came to me and offered to kill you because of the *inconvenience*. The disrespect.”

“You’re nothing but meat to him,” Tobias hissed. “Nothing but a toy to bat around until he’s had his fill and moves to greener pastures with fatter pigs.” At the sound of a creaking stair, his eyes lightened, eager. “…Wouldn’t you agree, Hannibal?” he asked, turning to him.

In the gloom of the basement lights, Hannibal tilted his head.

There were many things Will had been trying to prepare himself for –death, torture, mutilation, abuse, starvation –but Hannibal standing at the foot of Tobias Budge’s stairs wasn’t one of them. His stomach clenched, and he felt as though he’d been gutted, the breath leaving him in one large, horrendous *whoosh*. His mind, sharp and jagged with fear serrating his words, scattered his thoughts until he couldn’t quite grab onto one, floundering for a foothold in the midst of the chaos. This wasn’t happening.

This wasn’t happening.

Over Hannibal’s three-piece suit, a strange, fitted, plastic suit rested along the fibers, coming up just underneath his chin. His eyes, black in the light, flicked from Tobias Budge to Will, and his lips pressed into a flat line. His gaze fell to the blood on Will’s lips and chin.

“Is that your blood, or his?” he asked Tobias, like they were discussing the weather.

“Mine,” Tobias said sourly. He tucked his hands into his pockets, hiding the wound.

Will gaped, mouth working furiously as he tried to find enough breath to make words.

“I missed the overture,” Hannibal said dismally. He studied the blood, and his lip twitched into a smile.

“It’s still act one, though. He’s been unspeakably rude,” Tobias said. His chin lifted, a proud tilt.

“Fear makes his mouth sharp,” Hannibal agreed, and he rocked back onto his heels. “Unlike your own friend.”

“Yes, where is Franklyn?”

“Dead upstairs,” Hannibal replied genially.

“I’d wanted to kill him,” Tobias said dismally.

“After the cat and mouse chase, I couldn’t resist. What’s yours is mine,” he said, and he seemed to note every injury on Will’s person, from his wrists to his shoulder that wasn’t sitting quite right. Will stared back, resenting, furious. A niggling, dark whisper curled around his ear, slithered deep inside: *wasn’t it so very obvious? How could you be so blind?*

“And what’s yours is mine,” Tobias agreed.

“That…is where you’re wrong,” Hannibal said, and he scuffed his shoe on the ground. “That is where you’re very wrong, indeed.” His head tilted, and Will thought of the way the light in Sangre had accented the sharp lines of his face, making him predatory, wolfish. Even now, his moves had a certain lethal glint, animalistic rather than human.

How could you be so fucking blind?

“I thought he’d make you a rather beautiful violin. You’d admitted to wanting to learn the trade.”

“Do you want me to kill him, Will?” Hannibal asked, addressing him for the first time.

“Do what you want,” Will bit out. He glared at the two of them, his muscles clenching and unclenching against his binds. Blood dripped lazily onto the concrete below with the effort.

“No, this is about you. I will help you, but only if you ask me to.”

“You’re not going to kill me,” Tobias said, and he pulled out a knife, the blade curving to a hooked back. Dazedly, Will saw it to be a gutting knife, the kind used on deer and game for field dressing. His heart screamed for release, and he looked from the knife to Hannibal, jerking his wrists against his binds harder.

“You have to ask,” Hannibal said gently.

“Fuck you,” Will hissed.

How could you trust someone you barely knew? Blind, blind, blind, blind <u>blind.</u>

“He doesn’t appreciate you, Hannibal,” Tobias said, and he took a step closer to Will, watching Hannibal warily. “He doesn’t appreciate your art or your method. Your obsession with him is because he resists you, but that is not what creates lasting impressions. You need someone that can comprehend you, someone that knows your mind as you know theirs.”

“You create things that intentionally imbalance so that you are the only source of stability when the ground falls,” Will said, ignoring Tobias. He glared at Hannibal, jaw clenched. “You *lied* to me.”

“You lied to me, too,” Hannibal replied.

“You’re just going to let me die, then?” Will asked.

“Are you going to die when you could have asked for help?” Hannibal countered quietly.

“Enough!” Tobias shouted and, too fast for Will to track, he lunged, plunging his knife into Will’s stomach and dragging to the side, parting shirt and skin and flesh like a hot knife through butter, like a needle through wet paper.

Will had never been stabbed before. He’d read enough and seen enough to suppose that it would hurt in an indescribable way, something far-reaching and all-encompassing that no matter the need, no matter the drive, the person would not be able to react. On television, friends had laughed over the action movies where injuries of genuine fatality didn’t faze the heroes as they fought valiantly, somehow winning despite overwhelming odds of too much blood loss.

This was neither one of those things.

It was warm first, then hot. Tobias wrapped his arm around Will to really sink the blade in, and as Will’s head fell limp onto his shoulder, the rest of him went cold. He blinked, gaping at Hannibal as the blood rushed from his extremities to his core, and when the knife was removed, he let out a choking, haggard breath. The sensation was a plug releasing in a full tub, and as Hannibal tilted his head, eyes intent on his expression, Will just barely managed to mouth, ‘kill him.’

That is when the pain came.

It was with each heartbeat, a pulsing flow like waves washing over, receding. He tried to let out a groan of agony, something to release the white hot poker that pooled blood onto his lap, but there wasn’t enough energy to. His eyesight could only catch glimpses between each slow, heavy blink as his head bobbed once, twice. Hannibal moved. Blink. Hannibal held Tobias, poised over a sink. Blink. The sound of shouting upstairs. Blink.

Hannibal’s face, too close but too far.

“Stay with me, Will,” he said, and it echoed oddly, bouncing through the fragments in his mind. Where would he go? He was strapped to a chair, and at the sound of water running, he was confused. Blink. Not water. Blood. His blood was dripping onto the floor.

“My clever, lovely boy,” he whispered. Blink. A kiss to his forehead. Blink. A palm to his cheek.

He blinked. Everything went black.

-

In his dreams, he was suffocated by white oleander. Hands pressed wolfsbane to his stomach, and he bled foxglove from wounds that wept.

-

In his dreams, he was visited by Hannibal. He was visited by the Chesapeake Ripper, too. In his dreams, they were much the same.

"Will," he said, and Will woke with the cool kiss of a hand to his neck.

"N-no, no-"

"Sh, sh…" Fingers pressed to his lips, silencing him. "My darling, dear Will. I only wish to know one thing. One thing and you may rest."

His protests were muffled, his body so very, very tired.

"Did you tell Agent Crawford to check Tobias Budge's shop for video surveillance of me? Just a yes or a no, dear Will. Then you may rest."

He lay in a field of poppies. His eyelids drooped, his protests dying as he shook his head. Who was Tobias Budge? Who was Agent Crawford?

"No." A sigh, and the hand at his mouth patted it, soothing. "Clever boy. My clever, clever boy."

-

He woke to a room filled with flowers, a feeding tube down his throat. At his dazed motions, his heart rate monitor's beeping increased, and a nurse came in to sooth him. At her gentle ministrations, the feeding tube was taken out, and she worked his jaw for him, helping sooth the ache that'd built at the angle of insertion. Whatever medicine they'd given him, he didn't fight her. His muscles were suspended in water, too lax to do anything more than accept what was happening around him with a glazed expression.

He was given pain medicine again, and he went to sleep.

-

The next time was better. Due to the nature of his wound, they wouldn't allow him to adjust the angle of the bed, but they did allow him to see people, friends whose worries tumbled out of them like overfilled cups.

Beverly stood by the bed, gripping the railing of it. Beside her, Alana's eyes were red from crying, and even Margot looked at a loss with a sort of detached, odd expression on her face. Zeller was left to the task of clearing out old flowers and replacing them with new ones. Will marked the passage of time by the deadest flower.

"Where's Hannibal," he managed to croak. He had to speak slowly, every slight movement sending an odd, aching sensation to his guts that burned.

There was an exchanging of glances, of eyes that wouldn't quite meet his gaze. Alana found the words to say first. She was top of her class, after all.

"Let's not worry about Hannibal, Will. Let's focus on you getting better."

Will stared at Beverly, and she gave a subtle nod. She'd tell him later. When nurses came in to check up on him, administer his next round of medicine, and shoo everyone out, he managed to convince them to let Beverly stay, as long as she didn't get anywhere close to the colostomy bag.

"Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper, Will," she said as kindly as she could. "Alana said I'd break your psyche saying that, but…" She shrugged. Beverly didn't mince words.

Will stared down at the nurse, his hands clenching the sheets beneath him.

"I guess you sounded off when you called Agent Crawford. He came asking about you, looking for you. When he couldn't find you, he went to Budge's place and got him to show security tapes from a system no one knew he even had. It showed Hannibal breaking in and taking one of the string sets, and…well, you received the string he stole. It was enough to get a warrant, and they combed through his place until they found everything."

"What'd they find?" Will whispered.

"He had a basement…my dad knew one of the guys that was part of the search. When he got down there, he…well, he turned in his badge the other day. It was bad. Body parts, surgical tools, bone cutting tools…" At a severe glance from the nurse, Beverly looked to the screen that tracked Will's now elevated pulse.

"They found remains of all of the dead?"

"Flowers he's sent you, photos he's taken of you, drawings…you name it. It's been a few weeks and the news is still hung up on it."

"Where is he?"

"That's why…they're still hung up on it. He vanished."

Will stared at the ceiling, focusing on not swallowing his tongue.

"Where's Jack Crawford," he rasped.

"When he went back to Budge's place, he was attacked from behind, stabbed in the neck by one of the tools upstairs. Got himself locked in a closet and managed to call for help when everything went down. He's down the hall, out of the ICU."

"That's a relief," Will said, closing his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Will. I don't…know what to say." Beverly was just as good at handling emotionally compromising experiences as Will was. He would have laughed, if it didn't hurt so damn much.

"I'm so stupid," he managed. "You don't have to say it; I already did."

"You're not stupid, he's a creep," Beverly retorted. "They've got a manhunt out for him, and a pretty high reward for any information. We've all already been interviewed, like

they're combing through us to find out who knew and didn't say anything."

"Alright, that's enough," the nurse said as politely as she could. "You've got his pulse at a place I can't abide, and I'm going to have to say that visiting time is over. He's gone through something traumatizing to his body, you know."

"…Sorry," Beverly mumbled. "Bye, Will."

The nurse ushered her out, wrapped up her work, then gave Will his medicine. He fell asleep, unable to fight the idea of a bliss where he didn't have to come to terms with reality.

-

Jack Crawford saw him when it was deemed he could physically handle the emotional duress.

He sat at one of the chairs, clad in hospital gown just as ugly as Will's. At his neck, a heavy bandage sat, and he leaned on the IV drip for support as he surveyed Will. His heavy-lidded eyes blinked, looked away. He sighed.

"Did you know?" he asked.

"No."

"You knew about Tobias Budge."

"A man has an eager interest in the Chesapeake Ripper and suddenly starts talking to me? C'mon, Jack," Will said, staring at the ceiling. The tang of flowers in various states of decay rested on his tongue, heavy. He wondered if anyone sent Jack flowers. "Tobias was obvious. I'd been serving Hannibal Lecter at Belle Bleu for most of my college life –*years*."

"What changed," Jack pressed, "what happened to make him act out?"

"I got fired," Will replied. "That's when I started getting the letters, and he started killing again."

"Getting fired was enough for him to do all of this?" Jack asked skeptically.

"Apparently." Will thought about sitting up. Decided against it when he stomach threatened mutiny. "I didn't know, though. I…I was so fucking blind."

Jack nodded in agreement, although he grudgingly said, "To be fair, he wanted you to be blind."

Silence. The tulips warred with the scent of antiseptic. Hannibal wanted him to be blind.

Chapter End Notes

So after this last chapter, there was a huge slew of new readers! Welcome, thank you so much for enjoying/commenting/giving kudos/signal boosting this work! After this move and everything that's happened surrounding the general chaos, it has absolutely just warmed me to see so many of you enjoying this. We've got about 5 chapters left or so, so you guys have tuned in just in time! (Plus, you got to bypass some of the cliffhangers, so there you go)

A huge thanks to those of you that were here from the beginning, encouraging me with your energy and general kindness to my writing. Nothing has inspired me more than how kind and amazing all of you are!

Also, I've gotten a couple of messages on Tumblr regarding his not seeing Hannibal as the killer versus him seeing Tobias almost immediately as the killer. I definitely intentionally put that comparison in the writing to show the difference that it can make when you care about someone that does something suspicious/terrible versus someone that you don't care about doing something suspicious/terrible. In the show, Alana Bloom was blind despite all of the warnings, and even Will Graham, after finding a friend in Lecter, didn't quite see how some of the signs pointed to him until it was too late. When we care about people, some of the natural instincts that would sound off seem to become muted, so much so that when the ball drops, you're left in the aftermath of a silence where all that you can ask yourself is 'how could I be so blind.'

I hope I was able to convey that in this chapter, too :)

Once this house is finally all put together, after all of these wine references in the chapter headings, I'm going to indulge a bit, tbh.

Sacramental

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 17: Sacramental

Abigail visited him, and it was the only time in his entire hospital stay that he cried.

-

Jack was released from the hospital, but he still visited Will. Will liked to imagine that it was because they'd both almost died in Tobias Budge's shop, but he wasn't stupid. Jack wanted as much information from Will as he could get, to better hunt down what the news had coined 'Hannibal the Cannibal'.

"Once you're stable enough to be moved, we're going to take you to a secure location until we can establish a safe house," he'd told him, mulling over a few files. He wore high-necked undershirts that hid the worst of his wound.

"Don't you think he's going to be angry about that?" Will asked, staring out of the window. It echoed previous conversations. "He will start a bloodbath because I'm not anywhere accessible."

"You're accessible now, and he hasn't come out," Jack pointed out. He paused, looking up from his files. "…He hasn't, has he, Will?" he clarified.

"Not that I know of," said Will, and he couldn't tell if it was bitterness or hurt in the tone of his voice. Jack surveyed him skeptically before going back to his work.

"Depending on how he acts after, we may have to look into witness protection for you."

"I've always wanted to be undercover."

"Your sarcasm is noted. Your safety is my priority, though." He sighed, mulling over something on a report. "I should have pulled you sooner. You shouldn't have been left like that."

"He was careful," Will said, like that explained everything. "The things I saw were things I'd have seen in anyone else, and where I knew him, I dismissed it. Same for you, too."

"He's helped on FBI cases before," Jack groused.

"That's because he's dramatic and enjoys being the center of attention," Will said without thinking. When Jack met his gaze, he quickly amended, "What better way to keep you out of his business than to be completely invested in yours?"

“That would explain why he engaged you as both Hannibal and the Chesapeake Ripper,” Jack said with a curt not. “One aspect of your attention wasn’t enough.”

“Which is why I don’t think making me disappear is the best idea. You’ll get his attention, but you won’t like how he does it.” Among other things.

There is no place you could go that I would not follow.

“If we can use his anger, then we will. We’re going to get that bastard,” Jack said ardently. Will looked away from the window and to the FBI agent that shouldn’t truly be working after what he’d just gone through.

“Obsession is a dangerous thing,” he said to Jack.

“You think I’m obsessed?” he asked, dangerously quiet. “You’re damn right, Will. You’re hospitalized from almost dying at the hands of a psychopath, and the Chesapeake Ripper got away after getting so close you were inviting him over to dinner. I’m obsessed with justice. I’m obsessed with getting that bastard for everything he’s done. I’m not going to rest until he’s either dead or behind bars.”

Will nodded and looked away from him. If Jack had lied, he’d have known it. He could taste it, something that radiated from Jack’s skin with a passion, with a frenzy.

“You’re going to use me going to a safe house as bait to lure him out,” Will said. He thought of Doritos crunched in hand as he goaded Jack on campus. He thought of Jack’s wife, of his dying and her dying and how everything felt like the aged petals of a flower –limp, despondent and veined with brown and death.

“Not until you’re well enough to be moved,” Jack promised.

“How’s your wife’s cancer?”

“Still cancerous.”

He stared at the one, singular vase that’d stood out to him from all of the rest. Friends, co-workers past and present, and random well-wishers kept them in wild, loud supply, more coming every day from those who read the papers or watched the news. There was one, though, one that he stared at whenever he could bring himself to, and he sighed.

Freesia, amaranth, roses, verbena, forget-me-not, iris, carnations, dianthus.

“I’m sure you’ll get him in the end, Jack,” Will said dispassionately.

-

The news said he’d killed Tobias Budge and almost died in the process. He’d been found slumped to the side of the Baltimore Symphony Killer’s still body, barely hanging onto life, the wires he’d used to strangle him cast aside. Will wasn’t going to refute that. Hannibal’s plastic suit would have ensured he left no trace, and it made things so much easier for people to think he was some sort of hero rather than the Chesapeake Ripper’s fuck buddy.

Freddie Lounds said, much to the delight of her fans, that Will's wounds looked like a Glasgow smile made by a lover. The photo of the colostomy bag had the top hits on the search engine for the first two weeks. It would have been removed from Facebook articles, but his junk had been covered with a large, black rectangle, so there was nothing truly grotesque to report on any social media sights. Alana promised him she'd tried her best.

He lay on his bed, staring at the vase of flowers left for him. He wondered what the petals would taste like, now that his tongue knew the flavor of blood.

-

The nurses liked to gossip just outside of his door when they thought he was asleep. Mostly it was about the other nurses not doing their jobs, or doctors that took all the credit. Janice that ran the desk in the ICU had a lot of struggles with her plantar fasciitis, and Derek never called Brandon back. Brandon figured that he was being stood up, and Yvonne offered to set him up with her cousin visiting from California. Dr. Stinton griped that the nurse running the front desk of the hospital wasn't forwarding his wife's calls to his office, and she was one step away from getting fired. Maurice told Hannah that Dr. Stinton wouldn't fire her –he was fucking her, which is why she wasn't forwarding his wife's calls.

They also liked to talk about Will, though. Whenever they thought the medicine held him deep in the clutches of drug-induced sleep, they loved to talk about his injuries, how he'd gotten them, the horrible things he'd endured. Unless he was being given codeine with his medicine, he didn't sleep, instead lying in a lovely daze where everything was soft. Even their words, horrible as they sometimes were, were soft.

"What a cute thing, just the most polite young man, and when he was thirsty he tried to get out of bed because he didn't want to trouble me for water."

"He tried to get out of bed? With that injury?"

"Oh, yes, I got to him before he ripped open his stitches. He just looked at me really confused and said he didn't want to trouble me. Just a dove, soft-spoken and kind."

"I read about some of the things the Ripper sent him –just evil. Just evil, and those poor people. That Agent down the way was talking with some of his men coming to visit, talking about the letter about wanting to hear him screaming? I got shivers."

"He's going to need therapy, I think."

"Hun, I'm the one taking care of him and *I* need therapy." A pause as they mulled over things. "He woke up screaming the other night. Sounded like he was getting stabbed all over again."

"How much did it take to calm him?"

"I came in and by then he'd stopped…had a fist in his mouth like he could just hold it all in. We changed the dosage of his medicine, and it helped."

Sometimes, they wondered at his friends that visited quite frequently. They gossiped about Margot and Alana kissing just outside of their car, hips pressed to hungry hips before they detached to go inside and see him. They thought Zeller was cute, in a scruffy, nerdy sort of way. They supposed Beverly and Will would date when the pain faded. Abigail was the sort of girl they wanted to go out shopping for, someone to get manis and pedis with. It seemed they knew her history as much as they knew Will's. The Minnesota Shrike's daughter, there to comfort the Chesapeake Ripper's pet.

"You know, I think Abigail and Will would date when he's not scared anytime he closes his eyes he's going to wake up with the Ripper over him," Hannah said.

"Oooh don't say that, what if he shows up here? Is he going to eat us?"

"Hannibal the Cannibal, indeed!"

"I heard he's a rich socialite in Baltimore –not socializing so much anymore, I'd say. My friend's cousin's schoolmate saw him for therapy, but I guess they need a new doctor, now."

"I'd want a new doctor after that."

"At least the poor dear didn't get *eaten*." They both laughed, short, nervous sounds. It was funny to them until it wasn't, until they paused just long enough to really think about it.

Sometimes they wondered at his family, how no one signing in to visit had his last name. When his doctor went over medical records, he informed him of not knowing too much, since they were all dead or gone. They thought long and hard about a mother that'd left and a father that'd passed from cancer, and they bemoaned children that grew up without siblings. Maurice had siblings, and she couldn't imagine a life without four other kids in the house shouting all of the time.

Sometimes they wondered if he was attracted to any of them. He tried his best not to listen to *those* conversations, but they were there all the same. Sometimes they wondered if Hannibal the Cannibal ever forced himself on Will, and it was at those times that he placed the pillow over his head or made a big show of turning on the TV and turning the volume up loudly. That always caused them to scatter in every which direction uneasily.

Mostly, they wondered about how he was going to move on from all of this, when the FBI was gone, the 'fame' was gone, and the wound still remained. Those times, Will was left staring at the ceiling and wondering something very much the same.

-

When he dreamt, he felt Hannibal's hands in his, the taste of blood on his tongue as he traced over the ridges of his ribs, wanting to savor each inch of bare skin. It took several dreams before he realized the hazy memories of the night he'd given into the Chesapeake Ripper had blended into the memories when Hannibal had made him forget his troubles for a little while.

He would wake and stare at the vase of flowers for a long time. Every time the old ones were thrown away, a new vase took its place within a day.

-

When he could, he would shuffle about the hospital room, taking his time to catch his breath whenever it tried to leave him. It was one such time, while he leaned against the window, that something cream colored caught his eye, tucked behind the pillow on the couch. Not many people sat on the couch, preferring the chairs close to his bed. He glanced about, but no one else lurked in the room. He was completely and utterly alone.

When he felt up to a few more steps, he slumped onto the couch and fumbled behind the pillow, his breath catching as he felt a very familiar texture of paper. His thumb broke the seal of the wax, and he poured six seeds to his palm. With them, the long dead petals of violet hyacinth and white tulips fluttered out, browned at the edges. They'd been plucked some time ago –three weeks? Will crumbled the tulip petals in his hand as he unfolded the letter, gaze hungry.

Dearest Will,

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel;
For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,
Like coarsest clothes against the cold:
But that large grief which these enfold
Is given in outline and no more.

Always yours,

-Hannibal

He pressed the paper to his lips, and it was only the sound of approaching footsteps much, much later that made him tuck the letter away, one of many secrets in the room filled with the flowers of the admiring.

-

He dreamt of an ocean, the waves cresting over him but not dragging him under, warm hands at his hips, his skin welcoming the graze of gentle lips.

-

He woke to someone in his hospital room.

It was not a nurse because nurse's shoes always made the same agonizing noise on the tile floor. It was not the doctors' stability or motion control shoes, nor was it Beverly's booted heels. The steps were silent, a mere whisper, and Will blinked up at the ceiling, waiting.

All of the lights were off, from the overhead to the lamp to the small light by the sink. Even the small night light that they kept plugged into an outlet had been removed, rendering the room into a shapeless darkness. He thought to be afraid. His heartrate monitor didn't change pace though, and it was somewhat satisfying to feel the thumping of his chest remain steady, sure. He knew what this was. There was only one person in the world that would ensure that his visual sense was of no use to him when they finally managed to show up.

He thought of laughing, but at this point, even his hysteria has faded, long since removed and replaced with something a little more dismal. His stomach ached, and he wondered how close he was to getting his night time dosage of pain killers.

The petal of a flower was placed onto his mouth. Will curled his bottom lip in and rolled it onto his tongue, savoring it.

"Good evening, Will," Hannibal said tenderly.

Will smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of the very sudden and intense love this has gotten! Seriously, it has just made my day! :)

I know this one is a shorter chapter, but I had to cut it off somewhere because the next half I've written up was starting to get a little too long...and I couldn't resist somewhat of a cliffhanger again ;)

Sacramental Pt. 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 18:

Hannibal tenderly stroked the top of his head, and if he minded the fact that it hadn't been washed in some time, he didn't show it. Will swallowed the flower petal and held still, his breath coming short –with fear or excitement, he couldn't say.

"Just down the hall from you, there are two FBI agents, one guarding an intersecting corridor and one near the elevators," Hannibal murmured. "Are you going to shout out to them? I think that even in your state, they'd certainly hear you and come running."

Will thought about it, discarded it.

"You lied to me," he said instead. The words burned and blistered on his lips.

"An unfortunate by-product of the duality of my life in a public space. You'll be happy to know I'm not lying anymore."

He wasn't sure if it was the medicine, or if he was really that messed up in the head, but Will grabbed Hannibal's hand tightly, shaking.

"You had sex with me when I was drunk," he growled. "You knew I didn't…I didn't *know.*"

"You lied when you told me that you couldn't recall that night," Hannibal said gravely. "We are both liars, in our own way."

"Are you fucking serious?" Will hissed, and he struggled to sit up. Hannibal's hand pressed to his chest, easing him back down. "Are you seriously going to say-"

"Will," Hannibal said gently, and maybe it was the way his name curled over his lips as he leaned in. Will stilled, staring up at the dark shapes of his face, and his breath caught. "My darling Will; I'm sorry."

He wasn't quite sure what he meant by that apology, whether he meant it for lying or he meant it for all of the death, but when the cold, seeping sensation of medicine slid into his veins from the IV, he knew. He stared at Hannibal with accusing eyes that drooped lower, lower.

"Bastard," he managed, although he couldn't say if Hannibal understood, what with the way his lips fumbled.

The last thing he remembered was the warm press of Hannibal's lips to his.

-

He was laying on a gurney, distinctly aware of the sheet over his head. The floor thudded along underneath the wheels, and he managed a low groan when a particular turn bumped his head. Underneath the sheet, he felt the solid grip of a hand holding his. Steady. Warm.

Next, a van with a large back area, and he dazedly stared up at the ceiling, trying to get his bearings. Waves rose up on either side, crashing into him. He was left gasping, eyes closed once more as he drowned.

There was the sensation of flying, of a takeoff that made him feel like he was going to rip in two. A voice asked if he had flown before, and someone else replied. Will held onto the hand beside him, and his head fell onto the waiting shoulder, too dazed to speak, to even think. It was nothing more than action and reaction, and someone pressed a kiss to the top of his head as he dozed.

When they reached their destination, he was carried in bridal-style to a house whose walls did not stick to Will's eyes. He was laid onto a bed with feather down blankets, and a gentle touch smoothed hair from his forehead.

"Welcome home."

-

True consciousness came with a lurching sensation and a husky shout. Will jerked awake, tried to sit up and ultimately fell back onto the bed, panting at the pain that ripped along his stomach. He didn't have to wait long for help; within moments, the sound of footsteps carried down the hall, and the door opened to reveal Hannibal, armed with a tray containing a bowl of soup and a small dish.

"Will," he said warmly, walking in. Will's hands fluttered towards his stomach but were ultimately battered away.

"Wh-where…where am I?" he rasped. Whatever drugs he'd been given clouded his mind, made thoughts bounce but not stick. He tried to recall the last thing he remembered, but the sensation was dizzying, and he covered his face to dispel the nausea.

"I found the care at the hospital sub-par at best, so I brought you to my safe house," Hannibal explained gently.

"You drugged me," Will managed when he didn't feel like he was going to vomit.

"I suspected you'd resist me kidnapping you, so I had to take preventative measures."

Will said nothing because ultimately, Hannibal wasn't *wrong*. He watched Hannibal lay the tray across his lap, lifting the cover off of the bowl, releasing steam. It was soup, a broth with tofu in it. Will inhaled the crisp, warm scent, unmoving.

“Am I to be your prisoner, then?” he asked, glancing to Hannibal’s face before looking over his shoulder. The room was white, nary another color save a large vase in the corner with bleak sticks of jet sticking out of it artfully.

“No labels, Will,” Hannibal admonished, spooning up some of the tofu. He held his free hand cupped under the spoon to prevent spilling, and he carried it to Will’s mouth. Will had the sudden urge to send it spilling across the bright white duvet, but after careful consideration, he took the mouthful, fingers drumming along the blanket.

“I'd said I wanted labels,” he said after he swallowed the soup. Hannibal smiled and scooped up another spoonful for him.

“If you’re going to label this, I would call it a romantic getaway.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” If his abdomen hadn’t hurt so bad, he’d have leapt up. As it was, his voice trembled with his anger. “You were going to let me die, you fucking-”

“You were going to let Tobias kill you,” Hannibal corrected. “Because you were angry with me.”

“You-” His voice cracked, and he stared at the ceiling. He took a short, uneasy breath and tried again. “You wanted to be able to say that I had a hand in his death. You took away all of my stability until I had nothing left.”

“Am I nothing, Will?” Hannibal asked quietly. At Will’s silence, he moved the spoon to his mouth, nodding encouragingly as Will allowed it. “I who saw you in various stages of your own becoming, you would say I’m nothing?”

“My becoming?”

“You stared into the eyes of a killer and took his flesh from him. You touched your hands to the skin of someone you knew you should fear, but instead you hungered. Is that not a becoming from the person you once were, where you’d have instead cowered and waited for death, hands pressed to your ears as you tried to keep the demons in?”

“It makes me a survivor,” he managed. His eyes fell to Hannibal’s hands, capable and helpful as they got another spoonful. “I had to survive you.”

Hannibal said nothing to that. He merely continued spooning the broth into his mouth, slow, mechanical movements. Will thought to be upset about it, but in reality there was something familiar about Hannibal making food for him, pleased to share some aspect of himself that he’d taken the care to create.

Will begrudgingly admitted that he’d never lied about *that*. Just the killing. Just the stalking.

“You pulled a few of your stitches, but I fixed them as needed,” Hannibal informed him after a taut silence strung up like fine wire.

"*I* pulled a few stitches," Will muttered, disbelieving. "I don't see how they were sub-par enough at the hospital for *you* to rip some of my stitches."

"Their security was appalling," Hannibal informed him.

Will opened his mouth to object, then stopped. "…You did manage to send flowers and a letter," he agreed painfully. "Freddie Lounds managed a few photos of me, too."

There was no reply to that, and Will looked away from the small window he'd been admiring the scenery out of to look back at him. Although his expression was still serene, amiable, there was a tenseness in the way he set the spoon down with too much force, the tightness around his eyes.

"…You found out about that, I guess."

"I believe you'd call it 'tasteless'," he said. His lips pressed together so tightly that color fled from them. "A violation."

"Not the worst she's done to me. I guess this means she's moving onto bigger waters since she got it online as well as the papers." He'd have laughed if it wasn't so downright miserable to think of. At least she'd blacked out his junk.

"She's not moving anywhere," Hannibal said. His hands fussed with the comforter, smoothed the rumpled fabric.

"What?"

"I killed her." He chanced a glance to Will's stunned expression, and his lip quirked into a small, barely there smile. Pleased.

"You killed Freddie Lounds," Will murmured, and he shook his head. "You didn't."

"I did. A final parting gift for Jack Crawford and homage to those that constantly infringed on your right to privacy."

Will thought to be surprised, but why would he be? Why should he be? The only person really allowed to make him suffer was sitting on the edge of the bed beside him, trying to spoon feed him enough soup to make him pop like a tick. When Hannibal reached for the spoon again, Will brushed it away.

"This isn't happening to me," he muttered, reaching up to rub his face.

"I should think you'd be appalled, but I know enough about you now to know that deep down, you find this immensely satisfying in an archaic, adrenaline-inducing way."

"What?" Will squawked.

Hannibal's smile grew somewhat. "You lied for me, you hid letters of affection from Jack to keep for yourself, and in your darkest moments, you ripped flesh from the one that

would harm you and bid me to kill him. You don't mourn Freddie Lounds. There is some part of you that wished you could have done it yourself."

They were back in one of the bars, Hannibal stripping every aspect of Will down until he was laid bare on the solid wood tabletop. He couldn't verbally affirm that; it was too much. Will swallowed heavily, avoided Hannibal's gaze, and nodded.

Hannibal lifted the small bowl of brightly colored pills and offered them to Will, gaze intent and probing.

"Are those poisoned?" Will wondered.

"If I wanted to kill you, Will, you'd already be dead," Hannibal said quietly. It wasn't so much of a threat as it was an observation, pleasantly quiet.

"Fair enough."

He took the pills and dry swallowed them, leaning back into the pillows of the bed as he blinked slowly, lazily. Hannibal removed the tray and set it on the night stand, meticulously cleaning up what little mess had been made before returning to the edge of the bed, reaching over to feel Will's forehead.

"You're warm," he noted. "One of the pills is a fever reducer."

"It's almost like being dragged across international waters takes a lot out of a guy."

"How did you know?" Hannibal asked, pleased.

"I was awake for a little bit…the second plane ride was longer. I heard…" He couldn't remember what he heard, although it stuck out to him for some reason. He frowned, trying to recall the way the blurred faces and spaces around him had swayed in and out like a bad LSD trip. "Accents. Languages."

"We're in Florence."

"Florence," Will repeated. He turned his head, looking about the room, then back to Hannibal. Fingers drummed on top of the covers, and he swallowed heavily. "You took me to Florence."

"You'd once mentioned never having had the pleasure of leaving the country," said Hannibal with his small, damned smile. "I thought to remedy that."

"You thought to continue fucking with my head," Will corrected. "Wasn't good enough to have me running around trying to piece all parts of you together; you had to see just how far you could push before the toy broke. Before the tea cup broke."

"Dear Will," Hannibal murmured, and the bastard sounded affectionate. He placed his hand over Will's, stalled tapping fingers kindly. "You're not broken by any means, and you're certainly not a toy."

Will wanted to argue that, to shout until his throat was hoarse with it, ragged with it, but the medicine was starting to kick in. It was slower than the hospital since it was oral rather than administered through an IV, but he felt it all the same, the lulling push and pull of waves that made eyelids heavy and breath deep.

"You *lied*," he managed before he fell asleep.

-

His nightmares always woke him when he started screaming. With his stomach ripped in two, he couldn't thrash about much, but he did startle awake when his own panic reached his ears, blankets kicked down to the bottom of the bed where they lay in a rumpled, sweaty mess. He stuffed his fist into his mouth to stifle the noise, and he gasped against his knuckles, trembling with the feeling of Tobias' knife parting his skin with smooth, swift precision from practice. In his most vulnerable moments, he revisited that scene, eyes fixated on Hannibal standing before him with such a clinically detached expression that he wondered if he'd even care if Will had allowed himself to die rather than ask for help.

He gave a jerky start at the feeling of warm hands on his back, easing him up from his awkwardly curled position on the bed. The shirt he wore was damp, and Hannibal removed it carefully, setting it off to the side before he climbed into the bed, shifting behind Will's hunched frame. Be it his fatigue or the general shock of this even being a real thing, Will allowed him to maneuver around him, legs on either side of him, Hannibal's hand on his chest easing him back until he was laying against him. His heartbeat was steady against Will's spine. His chest was bare, skin warm.

There was a distant thought to maybe protest, push away from him since he was, for all intents and purposes his captor, but Will didn't feel much like a prisoner. He was wounded, strung out, terrified from a memory that revisited as a horrifying dream, but he didn't feel imprisoned. He wondered if he tried to leave, if Hannibal would let him. He wondered why he didn't feel like trying.

His breathing slowed to match the man behind him, and with each steady second that passed, the sensation of drowning abated until he was limp against him, head easing back to lay on his shoulder. Hannibal intertwined their fingers, caged around him like he could protect him from most of the carnage of his own mind and an entirely too vivid imagination.

"How does your stomach feel?" Hannibal murmured against his ear.

"The pain medicine is still working," Will replied, just as quiet.

Hannibal hummed, low in his throat. The headboard creaked as he settled against it, pulling Will along with him. Coupled with the tang of his sweat, Hannibal's cologne was heady, calming.

"…How did you kill Freddie Lounds?" Will wondered.

"She behaved as a pig, therefore she died as a pig," Hannibal replied with ease. He could have been discussing the latest score for the Baltimore Ravens game, for all his tone

implied his care.

"How did you display her?"

"Do you truly wish to know?" Hannibal asked gently.

Will lifted his head, stared at the shadowed gloom of the unfamiliar room. He swallowed with difficulty, cleared his throat, and nodded.

"She hung from an apple tree, having slipped from a branch trying to reach the ripest fruit at the tallest part of the tree," he said. Hannibal couldn't hide the distinct tone of pride in his voice, describing it. "A branch gave way because she did not look where she placed herself in her desperation to attain her desires. Her foot was caught, wedged, and she hung upside down. I placed her camera on the ground, just out of reach of grasping fingers."

An apt sting, all things considered. Will wondered what he'd have thought, staring at an image like that. He wondered what he'd have seen, if he'd have gotten close enough to feel the defensive actions in each loving twist of her wrist and her bones, manipulated by a man whose protective nature verged on the unsavory side.

"What poem would you have left at my door in the aftermath?"

"*I was angry with my friend:*
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears
Night and morning with my tears,
And I sunned it with smiles
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright,
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine,--

And into my garden stole
When the night had veiled the pole;
In the morning, glad, I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree."

Will nodded to the words –aptly fitting, indeed.

"Who wrote that one?"

"William Blake," Hannibal replied. His mouth brushed against the shell of Will's ear as he spoke, sending small tendrils of warmth along his skin. "I was content to leave her as she was with her struggles until she infringed upon your right to privacy."

Will wanted to say that he found it a fitting way for her to die. He also wanted to say just how wrong it was to think things like that. Instead of doing either, he turned Hannibal's palm and dragged his fingertips along the lines of it, tracing out the heart and the head line, swallowing so hard his throat clicked.

"In the words of Archilochus: 'My one great talent lies in making those who wrong me suffer horribly.'" Hannibal allowed him to twist his hand about, fingers spread and laid flat.

"You mean those who wrong *me*," corrected Will with a repressed snort of derision.

"At times, I see us as one in the same. The way we view the world is so utterly different, dear Will, but there is a kinship in our thoughts, in the turn of our minds. You are the first to see me as I am and understand, whether you condone it or not. Two sides to the same coin that can be turned either way."

Will wasn't quite sure if he wanted to agree to that. He thought of notes slid back and forth beneath a door, thoughts shared like a twisted form of confessional. Hannibal didn't seek his approval, merely his understanding. He didn't want to agree, but he found himself agreeing all the same.

"Have your nightmares abated?" Hannibal asked.

"Some would argue I'm still in one now," Will retorted curtly.

Hannibal laughed, like it was the most delightful thing he'd heard. "I have missed your quips, separate from me as you were in that hospital room."

Will thought to argue that although he'd been mostly unaware of Hannibal lurking about the hospital, Hannibal had certainly been there, but he was tired and the feeling of Hannibal's arms around him was entirely too comforting. He stretched just enough to ease a small twinge of pain from his abdomen, and he let out a quiet, pointed yawn.

They lay like that as Hannibal eased tremors from his muscles, Will pressed snug against him as he held him close. He thought that at some point Hannibal would slip out from around him and go back to his own bed, wherever that was, but he didn't. They remained like that until Will fell asleep against him, breathing slow and even, skin sensitive to the gentle brush of hands that made touch a form of worship.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all of your awesome feedback and support! We've got about 2 chapters left now, and let me just say how absolutely wonderful you guys are? For all of the people that followed along from the beginning and just made me so excited to continue this work, to the people that are just coming on and giving this so much love...ah. You guys rock. So much!!

Roditis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 19:

He woke much later and managed to get himself out of bed without trouble or shouting. Hannibal was nowhere to be found, although with the light streaming in from the window it made sense. Hannibal wasn't one to sleep in.

Five minute walks three times a day, his doctor said, and he shuffled about the room, taking stock. At the end of the bed lay a small trunk whose top held his hospital gown and compression socks, those of which he was glad to be rid of. He did reach into the pocket at the chest of the gown though, fingers grasping, and after mild fumbling he managed to pull out what he thought had probably been lost by the wayside of transit across the Atlantic.

Six seeds.

He rolled them around in his palm, considered them with an odd panging in his chest. He thought of square pegs, round holes, hands that stilled tapping fingers, a voice that made his muscles ease. Long talks over Old Fashioned's and various types of wine, the way he seemed to see him the way that no one else ever did, the way he challenged and inspired in his own way. How he kept pace with Will, never drawing ahead or falling behind. A liar. A liar, and a good one at that, but one that lied for rather obvious reasons.

He found a new shirt folded beside the hospital gown, as well as a basic cotton zip-up. With his wounds, it seemed Hannibal wasn't going to try to drape him in anything fancy, and for that he was grateful. He left the room and walked down a narrow, dim hallway with small, beautiful pieces of art periodically set along the walls. A door on the left held a linen closet, and a door on the right held a half bathroom that smelled of lavender. He walked until he found himself at a fork with the left side facing what looked to be the entrance of the house and the right leading towards the rest of the house. He hesitated there, both from the fatigue of walking, abdominal walls not quite what they used to be, and from an honest sense of unease, like he could walk out the door right at that moment and not be stopped.

He glanced from left to right, pocketed the seeds, and headed to the right, his curiosity and an odd panging in his chest keeping him from trying to run just yet.

There was a study to one side with beautiful ash décor and a parlor on the other side with a harpsicord and a contraption he recognized as a theremin. Hannibal had once played for him, and he'd sat slumped in the chair nearby with that same longing in his chest that he felt now. He continued on, past a formal living room, what looked to be a sun room that opened to a balcony, and a much smaller room that revealed a washer and dyer inside, as well as a water heater.

He found Hannibal in the kitchen, which is much where he'd expected to find him. He stood with his back to the entry, chopping something with short, quick jerks of his arm, the ties of an apron visible against a stark white dress shirt. Will studied his broad shoulders, the clean cut of his hair combed back, trousers set just-so because no one else in the world would care so much if the inseam of their pants wasn't perfect the way that Hannibal did.

When Hannibal turned, there was only a flicker of surprise on his face at seeing Will. By then, Will had taken to leaning against the doorframe because he was tired and he'd walked a lot, and they stared at one another, not speaking. Will swallowed heavily, fingers tapping along the side of his leg.

"You're awake an hour earlier than expected," Hannibal said. He walked to the small island in the center of the kitchen and set a tray of chopped vegetables down.

"I live dangerously," Will replied. He allowed Hannibal to lead him to one of the stools whose back curved out, allowing him to lean back and take all of the pressure off of his core. He stared at capable hands that fretted over the zip-up jacket on his person before he returned to cooking, a slight hitch in his step that told Will he was not as confidant and nonchalant as he seemed.

"I have questions," Will said to his back as he fussed over the stove.

"I'd imagine so."

"Your frankness in answering them will tell me a lot of about what I do next." A beat as he scowled. "After I can take more than five hundred steps without losing my breath."

"That sounds adequate," Hannibal replied. He turned from the stove and walked over to a small bowl of seasonings, scooping it up and returning to his post.

"…You killed all of those people."

"Yes."

"You ate those people."

"Yes."

"You broke into my apartment and wrote notes to me under the bedroom door; you broke into my apartment and held a knife to my throat."

"You know the answers to these, Will," he chided. "Ask me the questions you don't know the answers to."

"…What the hell happened with Tobias Budge?" Will rasped. He hated how needy he sounded.

That gave Hannibal pause. He didn't answer right away, fussing over the pan on the stove before he lowered the heat, covered it with a lid and turned to survey Will, stripping away his skin with eyes alone. He'd always been able to see him, Will thought dazedly, even

when he'd been nothing more than a patron at a nice bar. He'd always stripped him down to bare bones, known without *knowing*.

"You met him the same night that I met him," Hannibal finally said. He glanced to the pan, then walked over to idle near the small island where Will sat. "He followed you, and in following you decided to follow me. He witnessed my killing of the student Nicholas Urvin, the 'wound man' as they called him."

"He wanted to find the Chesapeake Ripper," Will murmured.

"He found him."

"Tell me," Will prompted. Hannibal didn't have to ask what he wanted to know.

"He continued to visit you after coming to my office and informing me of what he'd witnessed," Hannibal continued. His eyes traced along Will's outline, expression placid. He could have been discussing a boring math subject. "He wanted to be my partner, aid me in your downfall."

"You don't share," Will murmured.

"I do not," Hannibal agreed. "When I said as much, he said he would demonstrate the lack of genuine care you placed in your suitor. He thought to show me just how swayed you could be at the attentions of any such person."

"He was serenading you, though," Will protested.

"Yes, which is why you were able to pick up on his cues so quickly." It sounded like he was praising Will, which was *absurd*. "I invited him to dinner with every intention of killing him. He'd gotten too close to you."

"Too close," Will agreed.

"It became a game; he had his friend, Franklyn, and I had you. He would send a glass from Nectar to show he'd seen you once more, I would give him one of Franklyn's ties to show I'd been to his home."

"You were playing a fucking game with me?" Will hissed.

"With Tobias," Hannibal corrected. His palm pressed down to Will's fingers drumming furiously on the tabletop. "During dinner, he informed me that he would kill you for me. Before I could kill him and save you the trouble of his existence, a colleague of mine knocked on the door, and by the time I managed to see her out, he'd disappeared. I began my hunt for him then, but it is troublesome when the prey knows you're looking."

"When you ignored me," Will recalled faintly. His chest felt numb.

"He sent me one of your pillowcases, though, with the petals of a rose inside of it. I knew he'd been inside of your home, and I thought to ensure you were quite alive."

“The night we…” He couldn’t say the words, couldn’t push them from his mouth.

“You were not home at a time you usually were,” Hannibal said lightly. He didn’t make Will say it. “I was concerned, but as I searched for clues to your whereabouts, you came home and stumbled into me, inebriated. It was not fear you exuded as you clung to me, but relief. Longing. You knew Tobias for what he was. You feared for me.”

“…Yes,” Will admitted.

“You hungered for me,” Hannibal pressed, eyes glittering. Will avoided his stare, focused instead on the corner of his dress shirt that cut against taut, capably muscled arms.

“You were going to kill me in the hospital,” Will redirected. “You said something about Jack?”

“You did not ask the Chesapeake Ripper to kill Tobias, but you did call Jack Crawford and tell him to look closer at him. I saw policemen arriving to my home as I was in the neighborhood, and I turned the car around and went to find Tobias.”

“You thought I asked them to investigate you?”

“If you had pieced together the obvious sooner, would you have gone to Jack Crawford first?” Hannibal asked.

“…I’d probably do what I was doing now,” said Will. Shame made his ears pink. “I’d…I want to understand first.”

Hannibal studied him, and Will was naked, exposed under his scrutiny. “When I arrived, Jack Crawford was in a closet. Blood seeped under the door, and Franklyn was grabbing the phone to call the police. He’d arrived just before me to see his friend and found a disaster instead.”

“You killed him.”

“He was a loose end,” Hannibal replied amiably. He glanced to the clock, walked over to the pan and lifted the lid, stirring in precise clockwise turns. “And Tobias needed to learn that the only person in this world that could ever sway you was me.”

Will opened his mouth to object, to vehemently oppose that bull shit line of thinking, but he stopped himself. He thought of his aftershave, the foods he’d consumed, the way Hannibal interacted with him, how he’d managed to make Will ask him to kill Tobias, and how he wasn’t wrong in the least.

“…You fed me your victims,” Will managed to say instead.

“We consumed the best parts of ourselves reflected in someone else,” Hannibal corrected.

Will laid his head down on the countertop and let out a ragged, horrified laugh.

“You elevated them,” he managed once his breath caught and his abs twinged in pain. “You made them art and they were aspects of me. You consumed me.”

He was startled at Hannibal’s touch that eased his head off of the table, hands that cradled his face, much the way they had when the Chesapeake Ripper helped him drunkenly to bed. He stared up to burgundy eyes, dark in the gentle lights of the kitchen, and he swallowed heavily.

“Have I consumed every aspect of you yet, Will?” he asked quietly. “You sound so utterly devastated in the face of the truth you demanded of me, yet when you had the chance to leave through the front door and find help, you looked instead for me.”

Will held still, heart fluttering in his throat. He studied the planes of his face, the cut of his jaw, the place on his neck that Will always found a way to kiss.

“You *lied* to me,” he whispered plaintively.

“Only because you were not ready to hear the truth. Did I not move at your pace, pause at your pauses, dear Will?”

He had. Will nodded slowly, reluctantly. “Were you ever going to tell me?”

“I was going to, but events with Tobias Budge escalated the situation to where it was out of both of our hands.”

“I have a hard time thinking you let many things out of your hands,” Will retorted.

“I would let you,” Hannibal replied easily. “If you walk out of that door, Will Graham, I will not follow you, not because I do not wish to but because you ask it of me.”

It didn’t sound like a lifeline, those words. It somehow sounded bleak, ugly. He recalled the way the Ripper had assured him that there was no place Will could go that he couldn’t follow, but it had never occurred to him that the Ripper would *choose* not to follow if he asked nicely enough. Was it a trap? A gimmick?

No, he realized dazedly, *in the end Persephone chose to remain. Hades didn’t force her.*

“…I think I want to lay down,” he said at last. He wasn’t sure what to do about the lump building in his throat, stifling his breath.

“You’re understandably tired,” Hannibal replied. When Will stood up, he helped him back to the bedroom, fussing about his blankets like a mother hen, checking his bandage and redressing the wound. Will allowed Hannibal to dose him after drinking down a small bowl of miso soup, and he was left to the solitude of a sleep that wasn’t quite restful, confusion his bedmate and a strange sense that he was exactly where he wanted to be.

-

He was found by the entrance to the house in the middle of the night. It wasn't quite an escape, and Hannibal's expression when he stared down at him was equal parts confused and amused. Sitting propped up against the door that would lead to some semblance of freedom, Will figured that it was more of an accounting for just where he was and just what his options were more than anything else. He wasn't trying to leave; he merely wanted to test out the door that would let him.

"I can assure you that your bed is far more comfortable than that floor," Hannibal said. His voice was low, sandpaper from sleep. Dressed in a matching set of satin pajamas, sleeping robe hanging open, he had every appearance of a rich aristocrat, rumpled from being woken in the middle of the night by a shitty college kid with a gut wound and a sore temper.

Will drummed fingers on the marble floor beneath him. It was cold, unforgiving in the way it dug into his tailbone, but it seemed like the best place at the moment. He stared up at Hannibal, the antique hallway lamp he'd turned on casting shadows every which way behind him. It gave him every appearance of the devil, of something not-quite human. After finally seeing the man behind the letters, the bodies, the terror, the description was fitting for him.

"It's a good place to think," he said, as conversational as he could be. He refused to acknowledge that Hannibal had only found him there because he'd slumped down in exhaustion, accidentally knocking a small end table over and sending the vase on top of it crashing to the floor where it lay shattered nearby. He avoided looking at the shards of something that looked far more expensive than his tuition.

"Are you having trouble thinking?"

"Having trouble sleeping."

Hannibal nodded, and with careful deliberation he sat down on the floor as well, crossing his legs like this was an everyday occurrence in a house like this. He also ignored the broken vase.

"If you're having nightmares-"

"You've been in my bed when I've had nightmares," Will interrupted him. "The first time, I tried to be embarrassed about it the next day, but you convinced me to skip class and stay in your bed all day with you. You made breakfast in bed, you played your theremin for me, and you even streamed Netflix on your tablet to try and keep me occupied until we finally got up, showered, and went to a drive-in movie that night. I didn't even know they still did drive-in movies."

"There is nothing embarrassing about nightmares," Hannibal replied. "They are completely natural, a conduit from our sub-conscious to play out our fears or fantasies in a space where they can be the most vivid and uninhibited."

Will licked his dry lips, staring at him. "Four days later, I woke up with you holding a knife to my throat."

“There was an uncertainty that without it, you’d attempt to fight against me.” If he was embarrassed, it didn’t show in his face or tell in his tone. His words were factual, almost pleasant.

“You liked my resistance to you, though.”

“I didn’t wish to fight with you, that night. I simply desired to be close.”

“I was fucking close with you, Hannibal.” Will tried to make the words bite, snap, but they honestly sounded more along the lines of coaxing, a gentle persuasion. “I was close enough that we were dating. I wasn’t seeing anyone but you, and you knew that!”

“I wanted you to be close to the aspects of myself that society has deemed untoward or unsavory. We could hardly do that at a drive-in movie.”

“You were testing me, trying to see just how much bull-shit I’d put up with before it was too much,” Will challenged. He pressed his head back against the door, ornate and detailed in its carving and stained glass.

“If you have a line, Will Graham, I haven’t crossed it,” said Hannibal evenly.

“Do you really think that?”

“I know enough about you to know that your understanding of violence is such that after a time, you were not afraid of me, but of yourself. The Chesapeake Ripper sits not just two feet away from you right now, Will Graham, but are you afraid?”

It was a challenging question, and Will couldn’t keep eye contact with him. He thought of Freddie Lounds, apparently dead at Hannibal’s hand because she’d crossed a line. Did Will have lines? He supposed he had at least a line in regards to a genuine desire for privacy. He had a line drawn for innocents, one drawn for friends. He had a line drawn for Hannibal, but it was terrifying to realize he was not standing on the other side of it.

“How did you even first notice me?” he rasped, “sitting at Belle Bleu as a patron?”

“You broke a glass once, dear Will, and cut yourself on it. While others would curse, fumble, clean up the mess, you stared at the blood that dripped into the now ruined water, and there was the most intriguing of expressions that crossed your face as you looked at your torn skin. You appeared befuddled, but most of all intrigued. It took far longer than normal to clean your wound, and you found your way back to me with pupils dilated, like it excited you.

“As someone that has worked within my field for a few years now, I have grown familiar with recognizing certain disorders over a time. Your work at Belle Bleu began as a young freshman, but even then you avoided eyes and struggled with patrons whose emotions ran too high. You seemed most at ease around me because I did not impress my emotions upon you, overwhelming in my thoughts or behavior.”

It didn't sound as arrogant as Will expected. Hannibal's emotions, even so many years before, had been muted, his voice polite and his words unobtrusive. Against the wake of the regulars arguing over politics, bar flies drunk and burning away 401 K's, Hannibal's small corner where he sipped wine, read the newspaper, and wondered at Will's latest homework assignment had been a highlight, in truth.

"You didn't share much in the way of yourself," Hannibal murmured. "And yet your silence said more than any words ever could. I've always seen you, Will Graham. When you tapped fingers to expel your emotions, when you misread your excitement as fear, when you watched a fight break out in the parking lot and looked a breath away from wishing to join it; I saw you."

"Were you following me before I was fired?" he asked. He wasn't sure quite what to describe his tone as –curious? Needful?

"No."

"That really was the catalyst, then," he murmured, more to himself. He pressed his back to the door, thought of the time that Hannibal had once pressed back on the other side. Just when had he opened it so that they could stand on the same side?

"So to speak, yes." Hannibal's expression was grave; he was taking this as seriously as Will needed him to. "I had been content to see you as you were, as you tried to present yourself. Quite difficult to continue the pattern when you were no longer of the employ of their establishment."

"You were killing before me."

"Yes."

"You'll continue killing after?"

"Is there an after for you, dear Will?" Hannibal asked. "Do you see this as a part of your life, much like a book where the first part is 'Before the Chesapeake Ripper', the second 'During the Chesapeake Ripper', and the final labeled 'After the Chesapeake Ripper'? Or would you see your life as a continuous piece where there is no after because the Chesapeake Ripper remains?"

Did Will want him to remain? He looked down at his clothes, hands crammed into pockets as fingers fumbled over six seeds. He wet his lips, exhaled slowly. In every fiber of his being he knew what the right answer was, what any other person in the world would say when in a position like this.

He wasn't just any other person, though. That's how Hannibal first noticed him.

"Are you going to keep killing?" he pressed.

"Is your decision based entirely on how I answer that question?"

He sighed, smiled a little. "…No. It should be, but no."

Hannibal considered him, in their small space near the door Will was invited to walk through at any time. Will was sure all he'd need to do was find a policeman or a kind citizen to call, and he'd be whisked to a hospital where he'd call Jack Crawford and be returned to the states in a matter of days. The moment they knew who he was, he'd have every comfort accessible to him, and he'd find his way home to his friends and his school where he'd graduate and do something with his degree in criminology helping people catch men much like Hannibal in every way.

No, not in every way, though; Hannibal, much like Will, was completely unique.

"Help me up?" he asked, looking back at Hannibal. Hannibal rose easily from his position and helped Will up, smoothing his hair back and leaning in to press a kiss to his forehead. Will allowed it, although he didn't return the favor.

He was tucked into bed once more, dosed with a hearty blend of painkillers for his stomach, and Will stared up at the ceiling above him, wondering at six seeds and hands that reached willingly.

-

He was staring at that damn door again.

Hannibal had cleaned up the shattered vase, still made no comment on it. He was elsewhere in the house that Will could estimate at a solid $500,000 sort of home rich cats fought and died over, and it left him to his mild obsession with the delicate curves of wood around windowpanes of stained glass in peace.

He should walk through the door.

He still hadn't. Not even after five days.

At one point he'd placed his hand on the knob, then lightly punched the spot beside it when he couldn't turn it. He paced near it; he sat on the chair that stood beside the end table that no longer housed an expensive vase. He weighed options, but in the end he found himself standing just before the door, staring at it.

"Although there is no doctor here, I was once in the medical field. I can't let you move about for so long this early in your healing. Five minute increments at most."

Will wasn't sure how long Hannibal had stood behind him, but Will turned to look at him, aggrieved. Something in his expression gave Hannibal pause, and his head tilted, ever-so-slightly.

"Will?" he ventured.

"Do you love me?" Will asked bluntly.

Whatever Hannibal was expecting, that wasn't it. His brows lifted, and he tilted his head to study Will, gaze inscrutable.

“I do,” he said evenly, after a moment of thought. Whatever he was looking for on Will’s face, he’d found it. “Everything that I have done is because I love you.”

Will believed him. Staring at him, the small distance between them charged with something smacking of change, he believed him. His stomach ached, his guts panged, but he managed to withdraw the seeds from his pocket, gripping them tightly. With slow, careful deliberation he opened his palm and showed them to Hannibal, letting him see just what he’d taken with him across the world.

Without hesitation, he popped them into his mouth and swallowed them.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we've got one chapter left after this --the epilogue, if you will! If you're still interested, I'm more than happy to do a prologue as well, making it 2 chapters left, but that's up to you! :) This has been an amazing, epic ride with y'all, and I can't express just how inspiring and wonderful you've been with your responses and your eagerness for more. It seriously just...honestly makes this writer so happy and giddy and I'm not quite sure what other emotions I can toss in there to convey how thankful I am. :) You guys rock.

Epilogue: Nebbiolo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue:

Six Years Later:

Will stepped into a house that smelled like freshly cooked veal.

He hung his keys on a hook and put his wool coat in the closet, considering the smell with a mild annoyance, something coupled with exasperation. Of all of the times, of all of the foods at a time like *this*…

It was a good smell, all things considered; the things considered were mildly unsavory, though, and it was with trepidation that he headed down the hall to the kitchen, the smell wafting from the door hitting him in the face when he nudged it open.

"Welcome home," Hannibal said warmly. He stood poised before a masterpiece of plates, shirtsleeves rolled up, vest protected by a stark white apron that hadn't seen a stain on it once in the six years Will had witnessed it in use. Aesthetics and all, he supposed, that Hannibal wore it. Hannibal positively drowned in aesthetics.

"Are you serious?" Will asked, tossing a file down on the counter.

"It is an honest, warm welcome," Hannibal assured him. He glanced up from delicately placing parsley alongside a piece of meat cooked to perfection, eyes bright and lip quirked in the smallest of smiles.

"I've got a case with four dead bodies, and you're cooking this?" Will demanded.

"It's veal."

"It's *veal*?" Will snorted derisively.

"This time, it's veal," Hannibal assured him. He circled the small island and headed to the fridge, withdrawing a bottle. "Coupled with the beer I fermented in a chardonnay wine barrel, it will be a lovely addition to the table."

"…That is good beer," Will allowed. He glanced from the veal to the bottle that Hannibal was pouring into a glass for him, and he sighed, rolling his shirtsleeves up. "How can I help?"

He was allowed to mince a few greens and assist in setting the table, although the presentation of the food was always left to Hannibal and Hannibal alone. It was part of the delight in cooking, or so Will had been told. It was with suspicion that he bit into the veal, but after a few smooth cuts, he allowed himself to believe that it was veal and he ate with far

more gusto. His palette had gotten better with time and practice, although once upon a time he wouldn't have been able to distinguish a beef patty from a veggie burger after it was cooked.

"Did you not believe me?" Hannibal asked, watching him cut another bite.

"I didn't." He paused, chewing slowly, savoring the herbs it'd been rolled in before being cooked so slowly that it melted in his mouth. "Work is hell," he said around the food.

"A long day. You're in need of a treat, I think."

"I need bodies to stop showing up by the Trevi Fountain," Will muttered savagely. "…He's calling himself Il Monstro, you know."

He noted the subtle changes in Hannibal's stance; his shoulders tensed, his hand gripped the fork tighter. He didn't stop cutting his food, although there was such precision and focus on it that it seemed mildly overkill.

"Is he?"

"It's a copycat, Hannibal."

"You're sure it's a copycat?" Hannibal asked. "Or are you gauging my actions to see whether or not I appear particularly pleased with my behaviors as of late?"

Will took another pointed bite of food. "It's veal," he said. "Your last kill was four hours from here, twenty-seven days ago. You cooked the leg in clay."

"A copycat," Hannibal murmured.

"He's claiming your kills from seventeen years ago, you know," Will said conversationally. "From Florence."

He took a sip of the beer, tracked the pulse thudding in Hannibal's neck.

"You're enjoying the sensation of needling me, dear Will," Hannibal replied with a tone of utmost politeness.

"I am."

"Are there any leads?" he wondered. "Or are the police as baffled as they ever were?"

"They're as baffled as ever," said Will, taking another bite of food. "He's taking surgical trophies, but what's he doing with them?"

"Is he eating them?"

"No." Will watched Hannibal chew with delicate care. "I think he's selling them and using your work to hide his work."

“Clever,” Hannibal praised, and Will couldn’t be sure if he was complimenting the copycat or Will. He paused before taking a sip of his wine, closing his eyes as he inhaled the bouquet with a forced measure of calm.

“I can see you,” Will said quietly. “You’re furious that he’s stealing your work.”

Hannibal smiled faintly around the glass. “Mimicry is the best form of flattery.”

-

Much like Hannibal enjoyed surprising Will with food, various books, fishing tackle, and musical compositions, Will enjoyed sometimes surprising Hannibal, too.

“What is this?” Hannibal asked, staring. There was something in the way that his shoulders were tilted back, his chin lifted, that told Will that Hannibal knew *exactly* what it was –his need to make himself appear bigger, almost preening before what Will had managed to do for him.

“Meet Matthew Brown, the Il Monstro Copycat,” Will said. He cleaned his hands idly on a small rag, surveyed the man bound and gagged before them on a chair. The basement of the house they lived in served as a lovely place for Will to sequester serial killers that he helped the police hunt throughout Italy, as the sound was much deafened and no one ever suspected Inspector Graham of any sort of ill intent to ever have cause to search the house, let alone the secrets held underneath.

“How ever did you find him?” Hannibal wondered. The smallest indications of his pleasure were obvious in the faint smile, the light in his eyes turned black in the glow of the basement bulbs.

“Detective work and a little bit of ingenuity,” Will replied with a shrug.

The man in question, Matthew Brown, stared at them with the sort of expression Will supposed one would have when they’d been caught by someone other than an officer of the law –a wary sort of fear bred of the knowledge that there was no rule in place that said they couldn’t do whatever they liked with him.

“Clever boy,” Hannibal said, and once again Will had to wonder if it was intended as a compliment for him or for the copycat.

I thought it fitting for our deal,” Will said, and Hannibal lifted his chin slightly, ever-so congenial.

“Our deal,” he murmured, and he stepped forward to remove the gag from Matthew Brown’s mouth. It wasn’t anything fancy, a rag twisted and shoved far back enough to choke, and he tossed it to a work table as the copycat worked his jaw and mouth slowly, loosening the tenseness to it.

“Do you know who I am, Matthew Brown?”

“I’m not a copycat,” Matthew said.

“You are,” Hannibal disagreed.

“The only person in the world that could say that with conviction would be the real Il Monstro. Just gauge his tone, Matthew,” Will said, leaning back against the work table. There was a suggestive sneer to his lips, something just dark enough that Matthew managed to tear his eyes away from Hannibal’s face to stare at Will, all but drinking him in as his words sunk in.

“You’re saying he’s the real Il Monstro?” Matthew asked. He glanced between the two of them, lip curling into his mouth as he bit down on it, hard.

“With utmost certainty,” Hannibal replied.

Matthew nodded, the information reeling around his mind as he took Hannibal’s appearance in a second time, starting from his shoes and working his way up along trousers, vest, dress shirt and oddly patterned paisley tie. Whereas before, there’d been the uncertainty of a cornered animal, Will saw the moment that awe and adoration took over his expression, like the flipping of a switch.

“I’m a fan,” he said at last, meeting Hannibal’s stare.

“I noticed.”

“Really, I only took credit because it seemed that you were inclined to remain reclusive. They didn’t want to connect the two series of killings, but the second string was a homage to you, after all. They had to be connected.”

“Did you think that it would bring me out of ‘hiding’?” Hannibal wondered. His eyes lightened perceptively, a refined eagerness to his tone. “That you would at last meet me?”

“I figured if not that, you’d see there was someone willing to continue the work you were inclined to leave behind.”

Will snorted at that, unable to help himself. “He didn’t leave it behind. He just found a new name.”

Silence fell in the basement, save the pulse thudding in Will’s throat that he heard like it was pressed tight against his ear. Matthew seemed content to look and look well, unheeding of the tight binds against his skin like this was an everyday sort of occurrence. Will looked from Matthew to Hannibal, and he reached behind himself, grabbing a knife and offering it to him, handle first.

“He’s all yours,” he prompted Hannibal.

Hannibal looked from Matthew to the knife, then back again. There was a long, odd pause that didn’t sit right with Will, and he didn’t care for the passing of emotions along his eyes before he took the knife and hefted it casually, not with purpose.

“Maybe we should keep him,” he said, clever eyes flicking over to Will.

“What.”

“He’s demonstrated an ability to remain elusive despite seven bodies now,” Hannibal pointed out lightly, like they were discussing what groceries to go and purchase. “Perhaps he could be useful to us.”

“We’re not going to keep your acolyte underneath our house,” Will retorted. “You know the deal.”

“Yes, your deal,” Hannibal sighed like it was a heavy sort of burden to bear. “If we’re to kill, we kill serial killers, and only after we’ve found out with perfect assurance they’re serial killers.”

“I kill the rude,” Matthew said, and if the discussion of his demise bothered him, he kept it well hidden.

“I eat the rude,” Hannibal replied. His expression of interest at Matthew’s words were not lost on Will. It was a scab that he had to pick at, and he scowled.

“What the hell would you do with him? They always mess up, that’s the difference between you and them. What happens when he messes up and it comes back on us?”

“Do you think that would happen?” Hannibal looked to Matthew archly. “You only found him because you were able to become him, dear Will. He seems meticulous enough that he won’t make a mistake.”

Will gaped at Hannibal, at a loss. He looked between the two of them, then to the knife held in Hannibal’s hand without any sort of intention for use, and he let out a strangled, indignant noise.

“Unbelievable,” he muttered, and he stalked around them, heading for the stairs. “You’re fucking unbelievable, Hannibal.” As he walked up them, he tossed back a short, curt bark of “you’re *welcome*,” and he slammed the door leading to the pantry behind himself, twelve shades of mad.

He didn’t hear it, but he could imagine Hannibal laughing downstairs like he’d told the best sort of joke.

-

Matthew Brown was a resourceful sort of person, and Hannibal let him live –not because he liked the copycat attempting to take credit for his work, but because it drove Will to the sort of jealous anger that made him act out in somewhat irrational ways.

Ways like storming back down to the basement two weeks later and interrupting Hannibal’s conversation so that he could snatch a knife from the work bench and drag it across Matthew Brown’s throat with a short, quick jerk of his arm.

The blood sprayed in an arc that was mesmerizing in the old, buzzing lights, and Will stared at it, the way it spattered across Hannibal’s lap, sitting as he was, then the way it

continued to pour, red, red, red along the concrete floor. Furious for reasons he didn't want to explain, he let go of Matthew Brown's limp head and glared at Hannibal, gesturing towards him with the bloody knife pointedly

"He's a *serial killer*, Hannibal," he ground out. "Not a patient you get to crack open like a walnut."

Hannibal didn't seem upset at Will's actions; if anything, he looked from Matthew Brown's limp form, then to Will with skin crinkling at the edges of his eyes with the sort of pleasure that made a small thrum drag its way down Will's back. Six years, and he still had the power to make his knees weak with just a *glance*.

"Are you pleased now, Will?" he asked, standing up. He didn't try to wipe away the blood that greedily soaked into his suit; as he stepped around the growing puddle on the floor, he reached Will and stood before him, nose-to-nose and radiating the sort of pleasure that made Will almost want to kick him.

"How long were you going to keep playing with him down here?" Will demanded. "How long?"

"Jealousy makes you rude," he said, and he slid a hand along Will's skin to tangle into the hairs at the nape of his neck. "I haven't seen you take someone's life with such ease, such precision. Just what did you think I was doing down here with him?"

"What you *always* do."

Fingers gently caressed the tender skin of his neck, combed through his curls lazily. "Oh?"

"Get so far into his head that he thinks he has a chance of survival due to your esteem, then you'd let him go and kill him when he wasn't expecting it." A pause, and Will's grip on the knife slackened ever-so-slightly. "Rather, get so far into his head that you'd make me think you wanted him to live so that I'd kill him for you."

"Not for me, Will," Hannibal corrected. "For you."

"Bull shit," Will snapped, and he pushed against Hannibal's chest, shoving him. Hannibal allowed it, allowed him to keep shoving and pushing until he was pressed back against the basement wall, Will poised before him with a knife in one hand, the other knotted into his tie with a rather obscene shade of pink on it. "You wanted to see how long it'd take me to get jealous, you ass hole."

He dropped the knife to kiss him, hands reaching and grasping for him, holding him in place as he dragged his teeth along his lips and bit, hard. Hannibal gasped against his mouth, and Will grinned savagely.

"Happy now?" He pushed at his shoulders, pressed him tight against the wall. "Happy?"

“I’m taking an inordinate amount of pleasure from this, dear Will,” Hannibal murmured against his lips. “Make no mistake of that.”

-

Long after they’d cleaned up Matthew Brown’s body, cleaned the floors of the last of his blood, they lay tangled in bed, only a thin sheet between them and the air that smelled of sex and fancy essential oils. Hannibal drew lazy designs along Will’s skin, and Will listened to the sound of rainfall outside.

“There is only you, Will,” Hannibal said in the calm quiet.

“What?”

“Your jealousy is quite charming, but I find it pertinent to inform you that there is only you.”

Will looked away from the balcony doors that sat ajar to let a cool breeze in, the air turning wet and fresh from the rain. “…Okay.”

“I wouldn’t have let Matthew Brown live. He thought that he could have replaced you.”

“…You still wanted me to kill him for you.”

“You once desired me to kill Tobias Budge for you.”

“You could have just asked rather than piss me off enough to do it,” Will said, jabbing his side. He rolled onto his stomach and propped his head up with the pillow, scowling at him. “It costs nothing to ask politely.”

“Six years and you still get jealous if I so much as give another man too much attention,” Hannibal said affectionately.

“Trying to be responsible about how you gain your meat products isn’t jealousy,” Will retorted. “One less of him makes my job easier.”

“Did you enjoy it?” Hannibal asked. He rolled onto his side and stared at Will, gliding a hand along his hip. There was a faint whisper of something that ghosted with his touch, something that no matter how much time passed, it never ceased to reach deep beneath his skin, burrowing.

“My necessary evil keeps your evil from becoming unnecessary,” Will finally replied. “We put barriers in place because I’d much rather have you in the here and now than behind bars, not because we haven’t seen what it was like to cross them.”

“If I were arrested, my dear, I would find a way to you.”

“I know.”

He knew, like the vases of flowers that dotted throughout the house; he knew, like the pomegranates that Hannibal liked to include in their morning breakfasts, a man that drowned in symbolism and aesthetics so much that Will found metaphors in everything now. Will huffed out a short laugh and rolled onto his side to better look at him.

"I enjoyed it," he admitted. "But you knew that."

"It is always better to hear you say it, though," Hannibal replied. He reached over to turn off the lamp, darkness shrouding them in a blanket of secrets.

-

My darling Will,

Here, where the world is quiet;

Here, where all trouble seems

Dead winds' and spent waves' riot

In doubtful dreams of dreams;

I watch the green field growing

For reaping folk and sowing,

For harvest-time and mowing,

A sleepy world of streams.

I am tired of tears and laughter,

And men that laugh and weep;

Of what may come hereafter

For men that sow to reap:

I am weary of days and hours,

Blown buds of barren flowers,

Desires and dreams and powers

And everything but sleep.

Here life has death for neighbour,

And far from eye or ear
Wan waves and wet winds labour,
Weak ships and spirits steer;
They drive adrift, and whither
They wot not who make thither;
But no such winds blow hither,
And no such things grow here.

No growth of moor or coppice,
No heather-flower or vine,
But bloomless buds of poppies,
Green grapes of Proserpine,
Pale beds of blowing rushes
Where no leaf blooms or blushes
Save this whereout she crushes
For dead men deadly wine.

Pale, without name or number,
In fruitless fields of corn,
They bow themselves and slumber
All night till light is born;
And like a soul belated,
In hell and heaven unmated,
By cloud and mist abated
Comes out of darkness morn.

Though one were strong as seven,
He too with death shall dwell,
Nor wake with wings in heaven,
Nor weep for pains in hell;
Though one were fair as roses,
His beauty clouds and closes;
And well though love reposes,
In the end it is not well.

Pale, beyond porch and portal,
Crowned with calm leaves, she stands
Who gathers all things mortal
With cold immortal hands;
Her languid lips are sweeter
Than love's who fears to greet her
To men that mix and meet her
From many times and lands.

She waits for each and other,
She waits for all men born;
Forgets the earth her mother,
The life of fruits and corn;
And spring and seed and swallow
Take wing for her and follow
Where summer song rings hollow
And flowers are put to scorn.

There go the loves that wither,

The old loves with wearier wings;

And all dead years draw thither,

And all disastrous things;

Dead dreams of days forsaken,

Blind buds that snows have shaken,

Wild leaves that winds have taken,

Red strays of ruined springs.

We are not sure of sorrow,

And joy was never sure;

To-day will die to-morrow;

Time stoops to no man's lure;

And love, grown faint and fretful,

With lips but half regretful

Sighs, and with eyes forgetful

Weeps that no loves endure.

From too much love of living,

From hope and fear set free,

We thank with brief thanksgiving

Whatever gods may be

That no life lives for ever;

That dead men rise up never;

That even the weariest river

Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Then star nor sun shall waken,

Nor any change of light:

Nor sound of waters shaken,

Nor any sound or sight:

Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,

Nor days nor things diurnal;

Only the sleep eternal

In an eternal night.

Forever yours,

Hannibal

Will glanced from the letter, written on three pages in a neat, flowing hand, to the pomegranate seeds that sat in a lovely array on a breakfast platter. He'd have laughed at the set-up, that this was Hannibal's way of saying he was out early and wouldn't be able to eat breakfast with him, but it wasn't funny to him so much as it was endearing.

He wondered at a time when this wouldn't have been a comfort, but instead a terrifying sort of thing, the sort of thing that crept close and filled him with dread.

It wasn't with dread that he sat down to eat though, fingers brushing over the penmanship with reverence. It was with a hunger.

And what do we know of hunger?

It needs to be fed.

Chapter End Notes

Here we are! A huge thanks to GuessWho for showing me that poem, The Garden of Proserpine. It was a long one for Hannibal to write, but very, very fitting. Kudos to you, you lovely person! Side note within an end note: Nebbiolo is considered a romantic wine, at least where I'm at. Pretty good with strawberries, too :)

Given the response, I am definitely going to do a prologue, so although the end of the story has come, there will be one more chapter within 5 or 6 days --a prologue in the POV of Hannibal, as requested!

This has been such a lovely, wonderful time tbh. I can't thank you enough for all of the support, reviews, kudos, and love this story has gotten! I definitely tried to experiment with different 'styles' of writing/scene setting, so this guy was so much fun for me as far as really pushing/exploring my boundaries as a writer. You are all so lovely and wonderful, and honestly it has been your eagerness/support that has kept me writing! It's made me so jazzed and excited to post chapters and show you the world that kept crowding my head, so much so that I had to write it down.

I thought it fitting that this Will --pushed beyond his boundaries/limits (what limits he thought he had)--would have to create boundaries if he was going to remain with Hannibal. Realizing his own capacity for violence and understanding, he set up rules to keep them in a place where it could be sustainable relationship/space for him to survive.

If you're sad to see this guy wrapping up, though, I have 3 other fics out right now. One has 2 chapters left (Magnum Opus), one has about 4 chapters left (The Fault in My Code), and one is just getting started with 2 chapters in (The Unquiet Grave)! Check them out if you like!

Prologue: Syrah

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Prologue:

Three Years Before:

Hannibal didn't often enjoy having to commute to DC –what with the traffic, the rude drivers whose identities he'd never learn, and the utterly impossible FBI he oftentimes consulted with, he would often not reach his lovely home until the late hours of the night, far too long after a proper dinnertime.

That, and if he did find the time to stop for a relaxing glass of wine, the waiters were just snippy enough that he found himself contemplating the many ways in which their bodies could be carved into a lovely form of art.

All in all, not entirely relaxing for a Tuesday evening. Not when one couldn't very well murder *all* of the wait staff of Belle Bleu and get away with it. No, no; if one is going to kill, they have to be patient about the entire ordeal, otherwise they end up like the last gentleman he'd aided the FBI with: Terry Dougan, a clumsy sociopath that cut his way through a Denny's in a pique of rage after he'd eluded the law for four years and twelve other known bodies.

It truly was a troublesome state of affairs.

"I'm off, Will! We've just got that guy in the corner, and two tables just over there. Those guys I just followed up with, they're fine, and Dr. Lecter is a regular. Just make sure he's got a good wine, and he's not too much trouble. Don't put him out or anything, right?"

"Okay."

"Remember your eyes, right? Eye contact, dude, *eye contact*. That's half of tips. If you want tips, you gotta act like you care."

"I do care."

"Show me, don't tell me, 'kay?"

"Okay."

"Have a good night, hun!"

Hannibal watched his bumbling waitress grab a bag out from behind the bar before she disappeared down the hall where he assumed a break room lay. She wasn't entirely too much of a problem for him, unless he asked for a wine she wasn't familiar with. To

compensate for her lack of knowledge, she tended to bluster, and although commendable, it was mostly just annoying.

He glanced to the side where a young man struggled to pin his name tag on straight, and he let out a quiet sigh, unable to help himself. The young ones, while aesthetically pleasing to look at, knew next to nothing. On a day where he felt charitable, he'd help them learn their own menu, but he wasn't feeling particularly charitable. When the boy, no older than twenty or so, walked over to him with an askew nametag, he took a sip from his bold glass of Syrah to compose himself.

"Good evening, sir," he said, like Hannibal hadn't heard his earlier exchange with Cassie. "Cassie is off for the night, but I'm Will, and I'll be your server for the duration of your stay."

He had a soft voice, that of an introvert. Hannibal glanced up at him, met eyes that glanced away after not even two seconds, and he hummed lightly.

"Good evening, Will. Are you new? I haven't seen you here before."

"I'm newer, sir," he said, "but I'm learning as much as I can. Are you here often?"

"On and off, enough that Cassie has dubbed me a regular."

Will flushed at that, the embarrassment of realizing they'd spoken too loudly. Hannibal tracked a hand that twitched and drummed noiselessly against his leg, a nervous habit.

"I'm sorry, sir, if we said anything-"

"Not at all, don't worry. If you like, you can practice your trouble with eye contact on me."

A not-so-kind dig, but it did make him feel marginally better about his day. Rude, all things considered, but rather than turning a ruddier shade of red, the boy surprised Hannibal when he looked back up from his tie –a pleasant plaid of red, purple, and black –and met his gaze again.

"I'd appreciate it. Practice makes improvement, or so I've been told."

It was the tone change, Hannibal figured much later, that got his attention. The drumming fingers stopped their twitching, and his back stiffened, an impeccable posture from the youthful and disparate slouch before. The uncertain twist of his lips became an almost-smile, much like his own when he'd told a particularly clever joke no one understood, and his tone was that of something sophisticated, someone that knew more than they let on.

Truth be told, it sounded almost like Hannibal had spoken through someone else for the briefest of moments.

"I do enjoy that turn of phrase, moreso than 'practice makes perfect'. If one is not practicing perfectly, they may only learn poor habits," Hannibal replied after a beat. He

watched with amusement as Will nodded and shifted his weight.

"If I begin a poor habit, Dr. Lecter, please let me know. I'll adjust accordingly." He didn't wait for Hannibal to say anything on the matter. With a half-smile, he continued, "I see you're drinking a Syrah. We have four different varieties, if you'd like to try another."

Bemused, Hannibal couldn't help but reply, "I'll try another. Pick your favorite."

Will left him with a curt dip of his head, and Hannibal couldn't help but follow him with his gaze for most of the night. He brought a marginally better version of what Cassie brought him, and over the lip of it, he observed as the somewhat-new-but-learning Will seemed to become what was necessary with each of his patrons. For the loud, distasteful group, his voice seemed to grow and take on a dry edge of disdain for society as they made conversation. For the girl with an eager disposition and daddy's money to burn, he chatted aimlessly and validated her need for attention. For the couple in the corner celebrating their anniversary, he gave them space and laughed at their poor attempts at corny jokes. For Hannibal, he only returned to refresh his glass and finalize his bill.

Hannibal tipped nicely. At the bottom of the receipt, he added, *Excellent eye contact, Will. Your tag was askew, but it seemed to only add to the charm you displayed to the rest the patrons in the bar. Tell Cassie that her regular wasn't put out in the least.*

He decided to go back next time he visited DC, simply to see if this Will was some sort of charlatan whose social skills were an excellent façade to make more in tips, or if there was something more to him than met the eye. His own shift and borrowing of Hannibal's persona made it difficult to decide which was the truth.

-

He was no charlatan, Hannibal realized. It was something so much more interesting than that.

A new client whose disability gave him weekly, necessary trips to DC took him back to Belle Bleu on a Thursday, and he lingered in order to avoid the six o'clock rush hour and traffic jams. A recent art piece of his design left him with the sort of buzz and tingle in his veins that made him more than happy with the turn of events of the week, and he perused the articles on his tablet with genuine pride.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Lecter," Will said, and Hannibal looked up from a particularly gruesome photo of his work in order to meet Will's eyes. He didn't quite catch his gaze that time; there was a lull in his aura, and the smell of lab chemicals on his skin that suggested he'd been hard at work elsewhere that worked with iodine and silver nitrate.

"Good afternoon, Will. You appear tired."

There was a fumbling of words as he seemed taken aback by the blunt observation, and he swallowed thickly. To lie or to acknowledge? Indecision warred in his eyes for the briefest of moments.

“It won’t stop me from giving good service, don’t worry,” he assured Hannibal. It was a good reply, professional and distanced.

“Are you in school?”

“Yes, at GWU.” He lifted his small receipt pad as though it were a shield, and he cleared his throat. “What are you in the mood for today?”

“You informed me just this past visit that you had other options for a Syrah. I should like to try another today.”

“Would you like food with it?”

“Oh, no. I tend to prefer cooking my own food.”

Will nodded and jotted his order down. It was as he was turning to leave, though, that his eyes whose stare was fast avoiding Hannibal’s intent gaze caught the tablet, instead. At the sight of the gruesome photo, he stilled, foot struggling for a step before it came down a little too hard on the floor.

Hannibal looked down to the photo of the body, splayed out and impaled with far too many blunt instruments, and he couldn’t help the buzz of pleasure that lit his veins on fire. The Wound Man was one of his favorite medical photos from centuries before, a lovely version of the many wounds and injuries one could sustain during the medieval era. When he looked up at Will again, he was surprised to see a twisted, uncertain expression on his face, something half-pained and half-afraid.

“Had you seen the news?” Hannibal asked. “It appears the Chesapeake Ripper struck again.”

Rather than mention something about how disgusting or terrifying the Ripper was, Will nodded slowly, uncertain. “The Wound Man.” A pause as he licked his lips. “He was found in his shop.”

Perhaps it was something in the way his mouth twisted, but Hannibal couldn’t help but press, “I’m sure they want you to take safety precautions at GWU.”

“They say to travel in groups,” Will said, tone not so much derisive as it was dry.

“You don’t think there is safety in numbers?”

“Sooner or later, you’re alone,” he replied. “And if he’s eluded the FBI for this long, one can assume he would simply wait for the right moment. Patiently.”

“You think he’s a patient man,” Hannibal clarified, pleased. Will wasn’t wrong.

“I think he doesn’t like the name Chesapeake Ripper,” said Will.

“Oh?”

“His work is refined enough, I think, that something as easily made as Chesapeake Ripper would be offensive. Yes, he has a name, but names have power, and they gave him one that even a two-bit hack could make with a finger of whiskey and a little bit of ingenuity.”

His eyes didn’t move from the photo as he spoke. There was a certain sort of hunger in them, something that made Hannibal shift in his chair, to better see into his eyes.

“What name would you give him, if you were the one to create it?” he asked curiously.

“…My friend Beverly wanted to call him ‘Vlad the Impaler’,” Will replied. He licked dry lips, cleared his throat. “I don’t…I’m not one that thinks much on names and things like that.”

“You don’t?”

“…No,” he said, sounding much more like a ‘yes’.

It wasn’t until the page reloaded, reconnecting to the network, that whatever spell it’d woven on him broke. He gave a quick start, then fumbled with his pad and strode away quickly, leaving Hannibal with a heart pounding oddly in his chest.

He was left with a glass of wine, and Will busied himself with cleaning up the bar, washing glasses from a loud and obnoxious crowd of persons. The longer Will worked with them, the more drawn he seemed to become, their emotions bleeding into him with such a force that Hannibal could almost smell the exhaustion wafting off of him. He continued to peruse articles about himself, but there was a stab of bitterness every time his eyes roamed over the name. Chesapeake Ripper. Will wasn’t wrong with that sort of observation, although how he’d come to such a thought process was curious, to say the least. One as young as he seemed to be didn’t stare at a photo of The Wound Man and simply *know* such things.

No, not a charismatic charlatan. Something more. Something…better.

There was a quick, sharp sound of shattering glass that cut through an otherwise white noise of churning water from the sink behind the bar and the classical arrangement from the speakers overhead. It was enough that Hannibal looked up from his tablet, and in doing so, he was privy to something absolute marvelous. It wasn’t quite extraordinary in of itself, all things considered, but it was the reaction that made Hannibal pause in order to better look, to better *understand.*

“Shit,” Will muttered, but that didn’t seem quite like what he wanted to say. Held aloft in the glow of the ambient light in Belle Bleu, Will’s hand ran with blood pink from soapy water. The blood didn’t concern Hannibal; at least, not as much as the shards of glass that jutted out in a haphazard way in Will’s skin did. He thought to walk over and see just how bad the damage was, but as he stood up, the surprise on the bartender’s face faded, shifting from a natural, instinctual reaction to something with a hint of curiosity, of excitement.

Any other person would have either screamed, cried, or hurriedly tugged pieces of glass from their hand in an effort to silence the nerves just underneath their skin that complained. Instead, the peculiar expression seemed to darken as the boy turned his hand about and studied the mess, an almost clinical aspect to the way he pursed his lips and slid a finger from his uninjured hand along a particularly savage piece. Hunger was the expression, Hannibal decided, but the sort of hunger that made the room seem too small, that made chatter fall to a stop.

Hannibal, unable to help himself, licked his lips.

"Oh my god, Will!" a waitress exclaimed, and Will looked up. Unlike before, where he'd seemed to snap out of himself and become himself again –rather, the self he seemed to project –Will also licked his lips, mouth too tight against his teeth.

"Just a scratch," he murmured, and the girl dragged him away, calling for someone in the back to grab a first aid kit. If either worker noticed Hannibal standing like a fool beside his table, they gave no indication. He sat down, fingertips gliding around the rim of an empty glass.

He decided that he, too, was hungry. So dreadfully, dreadfully hungry.

Will returned seven minutes later with a bandaged hand and dilated pupils. Hannibal tracked each twitch of his muscles, each flutter of lashes as he looked down at his pad and finalized the bill.

"Are they sending you to a hospital due to the blood loss, or are you about to leave because customers complained about the inconvenience?" Hannibal asked, withdrawing cash from his wallet.

"I'm sorry if you were uncomfortable, Dr. Lecter," Will replied, not looking up.

"That wasn't quite an answer."

"That's not really a fair question." Will paused, a grimace about his lips as he realized just what he'd said. "I'm sorry, I'm not feeling well. It looks like I need stitches."

"Yet you came to finalize my bill for me."

"…Yes."

"I admire the dedication to finishing what you start." Among other things. "You must have a rather high pain tolerance. You don't seem too troubled by your injury."

Will nodded, an awkward jerk to his head. "I'll be alright."

"Keep the change, Will. Go and see a medical doctor."

As Hannibal was walking out, Will intercepted him, messenger bag across on shoulder, hand cradled to his chest. Blood seeped through the bandage already, but he didn't seem interested in it, as though it were no trouble to him.

"If I were to name the Chesapeake Ripper, Dr. Lecter, I'd call him Shesmu," he said.

"Shesmu?"

"He was the Egyptian Lord of Blood, known as *He Who Dismembers Bodies*," Will continued. "I think…if I were to name someone like that, that's what I'd refer to him by."

"You would lift him to a godhood, Will?"

Will didn't hesitate. "I think that…someone like that would find it funny. Someone that kills people like that already thinks of themselves as a god, choosing who lives and who dies. They would be amused at the comparison and pleased at the historical ties."

He walked away before Hannibal could reply, head dipped and pupils impossibly large. Hannibal couldn't help the small smile on his face as he tucked his hands into his pockets and saw himself out of Belle Bleu, and when he saw a news report later on the television discussing the mind of the Chesapeake Ripper, he found himself smiling even wider.

-

One Year Before:

"Someone call the cops!"

"Oh my god, I think he's going to kill him!"

"Dude, get back!"

"Fuck you, I-"

"Will, what are you doing?"

It was the name that pulled Lecter from his observations. Comfortably unharmed beside his vehicle, he watched two college-aged boys rip into one another, fists flying and blood staining two perfectly good work shirts. Well, not perfect –Hannibal noted a low thread count and a messy seam as one of the men went flying and landed nearby, hard.

He looked up at the sound of the name, though, and spied Will just across the parking lot. Looking at him gave Hannibal the same sense of purpose that he always felt whenever he saw him: an odd hunger, a sort of drive that made his blood run just a little faster, his heart beat just a little harder.

A girl beside him seemed to be doing her best to stop him from whatever it was that he was doing. Beside Hannibal, one of the assailants leapt onto the other he'd thrown to the ground, and punches flew, landing haphazardly in the man's fury. Hannibal wasn't too concerned with it, though, if he was being honest. People fought, and the two weren't dangerous enough to do real damage to one another just yet.

No, no, he was more interested in the way Will Graham seemed almost excited to *join* them.

"Sorry, I…what?" Will didn't look away from the fight as he spoke to the Asian woman beside him. His breath came short, and there was a wildness about his face as he took another step closer, closer. At a particularly vicious curse beside Hannibal, Will's breath caught, and his hands curled to fists at his sides.

"Dude, don't stop them, you'll get hurt!" She grabbed his shoulder, and that seemed to snap him out of his daze. He looked from the fighting to her, then seemed to realize someone else was watching. His eyes flicked up, then around the crowd that watched with rapt horror, then found Hannibal's stare just across the way.

Hannibal, unable to help himself, smiled.

Then, with practiced finesse, he shifted around the onlookers and leaned down, hauling up the main assailant by the back of the neck, dragging him away from the other that laid sprawled on the asphalt, coughing and spitting up blood.

"Get the fuck off of me!" the man spluttered, attempting to swing around and hit Hannibal. He'd had enough fight from victims to easily dodge it, though, and he smiled, side-stepping around him.

"Be reasonable. The police are almost here, and you don't want two charges of assault against you," he said. His grip tightened on the back of the man's collar, and he pushed him against a car, leveraging his weight against his back with ease. "If it will make you feel better to hear, he still hasn't gotten up. You've won."

It probably wouldn't feel like he'd won, given the usual jail time given for things like this. When the police arrived, they relieved Hannibal of his burden, then left him with paperwork and a slew of questions that made it seem almost not-worth the effort to step in and help.

Will was his waiter, though, so that made it marginally better.

"How are you doing this evening, Will?"

"Are you used to breaking up brawls?" he asked rather than answer. There was an anxious buzz about his skin, something smacking of bad decisions and bar fights. Rather than bother with a pen and pad, he kept his hands free, drumming against his leg with nervous energy.

"In my spare time, I try to keep things interesting. It was better me than you, though."

"What?" That stopped his tapping. He looked up from the tablecloth, really *looked* at Hannibal, and whatever it was that he saw made his breath catch.

"You looked as though you were going to try and stop the fight."

"…I wanted to help," he managed.

Hannibal, a skilled liar, knew them as well as he knew himself. He smiled politely, nodded. “Yes, but the difference being that you would have been fired, and I would have been thanked. Most restaurants have a policy about their staff not stepping in to stop violence due to potential lawsuits.”

“They do,” Will agreed.

“Therefore, better me than you.”

Whatever Will had been expecting to hear from him, that wasn’t it. He nodded all the same, hitched his pant leg up idly, and ducked his head, breaking eye contact once more.

“Well, thank you, Dr. Lecter. This job pays for school.”

“That’s what you’d mentioned, yes. I’d hate for there to be complications in that.”

He ordered a Syrah, since he was feeling rather nostalgic. As Will walked about, almost in a dream-like state as customers hashed and re-hashed the events outside, Hannibal wondered just what it’d take to make someone like Will Graham unable to stop from joining in the next time –how hard would one have to push to make him snap?

Something to table for the time being, he supposed. Will did have school to think about, after all.

-

Present Day, Belle Bleu:

Hannibal knew something was wrong the moment Will walked back towards the bar in his regular clothes. There was something in the way his shoulders tilted, the way his mouth curled down. Time had given Hannibal the ability to see each and every twitch of his person, know them for what they were. His general profession had given him the tools to explain the *why* behind the *how*.

“You out of here?” Bryan asked. Will glanced at him and nodded, unplugging his phone from a charger behind the bar.

“Yeah.” His eyes were shuttered, expression shutting down. Will didn’t share his feelings well with his co-workers.

“Was he an ass about it, or did he tell you why?” Bryan pressed. As close as he was to the bar, Hannibal heard every inflection, and an odd knot formed in his gut at the realization of what he was hearing.

“It was pretty professional,” Will said, shrugging. He tossed a cherry into his mouth, feigned nonchalance.

“That’s super shitty, man. Teresa over there hasn’t checked up on her people in over twenty minutes, but she’s been getting the best tables for over two weeks,” Bryan groused, and Will laughed bitterly.

“She can have them…I’ll find a new job.”

“Did you hear the cooks talking? They all knew about it before you even got here.”

“It’s fine, I’m just…” Will gestured towards the phone, then glanced about, always conscious of people nearby that could overhear. Hannibal tried to pretend that he wasn’t listening, but the more they spoke, the tighter the knot in his gut grew, twisted and wrenched about.

“Do you have an idea of a new job?”

“I’ll figure it out,” Will assured him. He walked around the bar to leave, leave because he’d been fired, and the idea was just enough that it made Hannibal call out to him.

“Were you let go, Will?” Will looked over to him, gaze pausing just at the knee of his trousers.

“Sorry that you had to hear that,” he said awkwardly.

“On the contrary, I’m sad to see you go,” Hannibal replied, and he lifted his glass of wine, taking a small sip of it. “Who will recommend such fine wines or inform me when something new has arrived?”

“Bryan trained me, so he’ll know just as much as I do, if not more, Dr. Lecter,” Will promised

“I will have to rely upon your word of his expertise, then,” he said, and his gaze flickered from toe to head, eyes settling on his face. He didn’t make eye contact with Hannibal, fixated as he was on the stem of the wine glass. “Will you be looking for another job, then? One without the strains of…social obligations?”

“That’s what was recommended,” Will said wryly, and Hannibal laughed.

“I’d imagine it’s difficult for someone going to school to find such a job. The foundation of the customer service industry was forged by students such as yourself, as they’re the only ones to tolerate the sometimes taxing needs of the general population.”

“We do our best,” he said.

“Will you be able to find one soon? You’d mentioned paying for classes out of pocket.” Will nodded, fingers tapping lazily on the leg of his trousers. A nervous tic, one bred from the worry of no longer having a job. The knot in his gut tightened, twisted.

“I’ll be able to manage, Dr. Lecter, don’t you worry about me.”

“Perhaps it is the occupation, but it is in my job description to worry,” Hannibal replied, smiling.

“Well I’m not your patient,” Will replied. From anyone else, it would sound rude, dismissive. From Will, it sounded like his own blunt form of attempting to convince Hannibal

not to worry, that everything would be quite alright without him.

How very wrong he was, though.

"That's true," he agreed, and his smile grew somewhat. "Well, if you attain such a job where you work in a place much like this, do let me know. I am particular about just who pours my drink, and you've never disappointed." It was an innocent enough statement, all things considered. It was said with such a turn to the words, though, that Will looked up at him, met his eyes, and as they stared at one another, his pupils dilated.

"Thank you, Dr. Lecter," he said.

"I'm sure if you inform your acquaintance, Bryan, he'll pass along the message," Hannibal added, lips curling.

"I'll…be sure to do that," Will assured him.

"Please do." He turned to his wine and swirled it gently. A dismissal, and Will picked up on the cues of it without thought.

That was what made him so special, though, wasn't it? He was a person that saw without seeing, that *knew* without *knowing*?

He finished his drink, and he lingered for a while at his table, thinking. Hannibal often lost himself to his thoughts, his mind palace filled with many doors and halls and dark things that took thoughts and ran with them, making them something great, something grand. His thoughts were particularly unpleasant, though, as he ruminated on a singular problem:

Will Graham had been fired. He wouldn't see Will Graham anymore.

That was a troublesome turn of events, indeed.

The knot tightened; tightened as he finally left, tightened as he made dinner and ate alone, tightened as he brushed his teeth and changed into silk pajamas, tightened as he lay in bed and attempted to focus on slow breathing so that he could sleep.

When sleep refused to come, he sighed, changed into one of his few pairs of denim pants and a basic t-shirt, and he went for a drive.

Where that drive took him wasn't anyone's particular business, but he did find it odd that colleges were so open about the living arrangements of their students –why post their private information online for just anyone to find?

Still, as he stood outside of Will Graham's apartment, he supposed it made things far easier for him. There wasn't much in the way of detective work for him, which was nice, and the lock to the door was picked with relative ease.

Since he couldn't *see* Will Graham anymore, it made sense that he would simply have to elevate him to a place where he would forever be able to access him.

He passed through a living room, the air cool on his skin, past a dining room table whose sole occupants were an empty TV dinner tray and cardboard from a Digiorno. Gloved fingertips grazed the wall along the hall, and feet paused just outside of his bedroom door. The knot tightened, twisted, and as Hannibal eased the door open, he wondered just what sort of things someone like Will Graham dreamed of.

Such a thought would have to pause, though, since Will Graham wasn't in his bed at 2:00 in the morning.

A quick scan of the small apartment told him that no, he wasn't anywhere within, and with a curt sigh of utmost disappointment, he saw himself out, turning the bottom lock behind him as he went.

As he headed to his car, he reasoned that it only made sense he wouldn't find him. Someone like Will Graham wouldn't take termination easily, and as a college student he had access to more than enough cheap beer, cheap bars, and cheap friends to aid him in drowning his sorrows. The thought didn't sit quite right, though. He didn't think Will was the type to have many friends, let alone cheap ones.

And sure enough, as he sat outside and waited, ever-so-patiently, within twenty minutes Will was dropped off by a not-so-cheap friend who helped him stumble from her car, drunk. Underneath the glow of the lamplight, Hannibal studied him move about, trip over himself, and fall into her with a low laugh that eased from him, smooth as molasses.

"You drank too much," she admonished, propping him up. "You shouldn't have let Margot goad you like that."

"Margot loves to compete," he said, waving a hand as he headed towards the apartment stairs. "So when I see her, I love to compete, too."

"Oh, Will," she sighed like she knew his burdens.

"I'm feeling a little irresponsible, Alana," he said by way of apology. "Prob'ly best if I sleep."

"Yes, probably," she agreed with a laugh. "Do you have your key?"

"Do I have my key," he scoffed, and he produced it as they made their way up the stairs. Their voices faded, falling away the farther they walked.

Hannibal waited until the Alana was gone before he also saw himself to his own home, thinking.

Perhaps he wouldn't elevate him, but instead he could help him *Become*.

The thought sat rather nicely with him; it helped feed the hunger that curled and twisted inside of him.

And what did Hannibal know of hunger, of the thing that crept deep and nestled far inside?

It needed to be fed.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! I ended up having to work early for a few days, so my normal editing time was obliterated. Here we are though, as promised :) The final installment.

Tbh, Hannibal is a bit difficult to write while directly in his POV. He's a pretty 'aloof' character, so to get too in-depth made it feel bogged down. It was a good challenge! I hope you guys like it, and that it brings a good 'there and back again' feeling to the work as a whole.

Thank you all again so much for your support, kindness, and general excitement! It's really meant so much to me as a writer, and I'm so excited to share more works as they come. :)

End Notes

You can connect with me on Tumblr as Elfnerdherder --come say hello, drop a message, signal boost my work, or send a request! :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!